Title: Harry's Pockets

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Prompt: 10. Well, you just let the kneazle out of the bag.

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Warnings: None.

Summary: Clowns are downright creepy, Harry's always thought, so when he and Luna hire one to work in their Party Props shop, he prepares for the worst.

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Harry's Pockets

"Please, Harry?" Luna asked again, with a slight up-tilt in her tone that usually made Harry grumble and give in.

This time, he stood his ground. "No," he said firmly.

"Just the one?" she pleaded, adding a note of insistence to her soft, understated timbre. When Harry only shook his head, she frowned. "Why not?"

"Oh, I dunno, maybe because I don't want to have to Obliviate a group of children?"

Luna smiled slowly, then punched Harry's shoulder. "You wouldn't, I promise. I know what you're thinking, but that was an innocent mistake, and I didn't do any—"

"You were about to pull a Niffler out of that hat instead of a rabbit—I saw it, you remember?" He affectionately flicked her cheek with a finger. "No magic tricks for you."

The jangle of the bell above the door made them both look to the front of the shop.

"All right, no tricks for me. You're the magician," Luna sighed good-naturedly. "I'm off to the counter; call if you need me."

Harry worked quickly, setting up his table for that day's session: magician's wand, black top hat, a deck of cards and a few fake coins. The chairs on the other side of the table were already in place—although they averaged only a dozen children, Harry always optimistically set up more in the Magic Corner.

Of course, it was Muggle magic, but Harry didn't mind. His intention was to pull in neighborhood children and give them an after-school activity; it didn't hurt, either, that Harry loved children and enjoyed entertaining and teaching them. It was good for the shop as well, turning parents into potential patrons.

Just before four, Harry slipped into the back room and pulled on one of his old Gryffindor robes. It fit, of course; even at twenty-eight, Harry was still slight, although a bit taller. Studying his reflection in the mirror, he licked his hand and tried in vain to tame one piece of hair that refused to lie flat. With a sigh, he turned and stepped back out into the shop.

No children yet, but Luna was off with a customer in one of the aisles. Harry took his time to survey his kingdom with a smile. The sun was hitting the front windows, lighting up all the colorful products within

like a rainbow.

There were rows upon rows of everything a person planning a party could want or imagine: plates, napkins and tablecloths, colorful hats and costumes, rotating racks of greeting cards and balloons, brightly painted bins of toys, noisemakers and favors. In one corner stood a huge helium tank, flanked by a slotted wall holding hundreds of balloons just waiting to be filled. Crepe-paper and glittered streamers hung from the ceiling, along with garish piñatas that twisted slowly on their wires. And of course, the most recent addition at the far end of the shop, Harry's Magic Corner, where he worked with the children on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons.

It was the shop of Harry's dreams; he and Luna had opened it five years ago, and he enjoyed every single minute he spent there.

The sound of the bell and chattering of childish voices pulled him from his reverie. It was time. With a wave for Luna, Harry set off for the Corner to greet his small audience of wannabe magicians.

ooOOoo

They were closing at seven that night, and Harry knew Luna was lingering for a reason. And he knew the reason, but had been hoping she'd at least give him the weekend….

"So…have you decided?" she asked as she leant on the counter.

Harry looked up from tallying the till. "I'm still not sure… Why do we need one anyway? I think we're doing fine. And…you know what I said, about the creepiness factor," he added blandly.

She stood and stared at him. "So, it's because you have a problem with clowns. Not because it's a bad idea?" When he made a face, she added, "Children love clowns, especially in a small group like we have. Have I ever steered us wrong?" she chided him gently.

Smiling wanly, Harry shook his head. "No, you haven't, and that's the only reason I'm even considering…oh all right, I'll go with you and see. But," he warned as he held up his hand, "I get the final say in this, Luna. I've got good instincts about children too, remember. Don't want to bring in a…" He rolled his eyes. "…clown and do damage. Look at Callie—I've not managed to make her smile once yet."

"Trust me, Harry. I really do think he'd be a hit; he can teach them all sorts of things, do magic tricks too, and best of all, make them laugh. Children don't laugh enough these days," she opined. "With a clown, Callie will come around, you'll see."

"Yeah, we'll see," he muttered. "So, where is this clown school?"

ooOOoo

It was true that Harry enjoyed the time he spent in his shop; it was also true that the time in between—the evenings and Sundays—were lonely for the most part. He had friends, and Luna, of course, but all of them had someone special. Ron and Hermione were married, with children, George as well, Luna had Fred, and Neville lived abroad with Gabrielle Delacour. Harry'd had relationships too, but none that had lasted. The most recent one wasn't quite over, but Harry glumly assumed that it was as good as.

The one small bright spot in all of this loneliness was his twice a month Saturday afternoon meeting with an old friend in Victoria Park. The shop closed at two, and by two-thirty Harry was on his way, making his regular stop at the nearby Starbucks for their standing drink order.

Carrying his takeaway tray, he rounded the corner and spotted the first Auror at the south entrance to the park. As Harry passed him, he said amiably, "Hullo, Chilton," and was greeted with the customary, "Mr. Potter."

He strolled leisurely, nodding to the second Auror stationed at the start of the circular pathway. Pushing further in, he admired the foliage and flowers, now in full bloom. As he rounded the next corner, he saw

the Minster of Magic ensconced on his regular bench, the third Auror seated beside him. As he saw Harry approaching, the Auror stood and discreetly walked to sit on the other side of the circle.

"Severus," Harry said as he sat, then handed over one of the cups.

"Harry," the Minster said as he took the cup and removed the lid.

They began as they always did, trading news of their respective worlds. Harry did keep up with wizarding current events, mostly because Luna force-fed him the Prophet every morning, but Snape filled in between the lines, injecting a humor and sarcasm that Harry'd come to appreciate about the man. Harry, in turn, told him anecdotes about customers, funny little snippets about the children who frequented the shop, and their progress with the Magic Corner.

Eventually, they got down to more personal matters.

"How are Teddy and Tonks?" Harry finally asked.

"Teddy has decided that since his step-father is the Minister, he should receive a special dispensation that would allow him to attend Hogwarts at age ten."

Harry snorted into his tea. "Precocious little guy. So, what'd you tell him?"

Snape turned halfway on the bench to face Harry. "I told him that since he'll be having a baby brother at Christmas, his mother will need him at home for the next year."

His eyes wide, Harry reached over and clapped the Minister on the shoulder. "A baby? Severus, that's super!" he laughed, enjoying the man's discomfiture. "I thought Tonks looked a bit sickly at Teddy's birthday."

Rolling his eyes, Snape confided, "That's been sorted out. Nymphadora is as stubborn as they come. How Lupin put up with her, I'll never know," he said with outright fondness. "I've finally convinced her that an anti-nausea potion each morning will not harm either one of them." He sighed, then smiled faintly. "But I am pleased. I never thought," he paused as he eyed Harry, "we'd have one of our own. Given our schedules…and Teddy keeps us busy."

"Well, congrats to both of you—you'll tell her I said so?" Harry asked earnestly. When Snape nodded, Harry settled back against the bench.

They were both silent for a moment, until Harry said, "This means you're having sex."

Snape made a harrumphing noise, looking sideways at Harry. "It would appear so."

"Why is everyone having sex but me?" he asked mournfully.

"Still no word from Aiden, then?"

Harry shook his head. "No, nothing." He stood to his feet. "Well, I must be off. I have to see a man about a clown," he said with a faint smile.

"Is that a punch line?" Snape asked, frowning slightly as he looked up.

"No, I'll give you that next time. See you, Severus." With a wave of his hand, he took off down the pathway.

ooOOoo

Harry and Luna stood against the wall and watched the clowns in the class. Some were practicing on a low balance beam, teetering comically as they stepped. Others were performing for a group of children seated in a makeshift grandstand. The clowns were garishly dressed in bright colors—baggy pants, smock-like shirts hanging out, ridiculous shoes that tripped them when they walked. Their colorful faces were wreathed in smiles and grimaces as they pranked one another; the children laughed and clapped as several of the clowns chased each other with slapsticks and oversized rubber chickens.

In a corner on the far side of the small arena, a handful of clowns were gathered around an instructor. Harry watched as they mimicked his exaggerated motions; it was then that he realized that these were professionals learning an art form, a far cry from where he'd imagined clowns came from.

As he watched the performance end, and the children gather around the group of clowns, Harry had to reluctantly agree that Luna just might be on to something. At least here, they didn't seem scary at all.

The group began to break up as the clowns waved goodbye and headed for the exit.

"There he is, Harry. The one I told you about," Luna said as she pointed to the figure coming their way from across the amphitheater.

Harry watched warily as the clown approached. "Why does he look so different from the rest of them?" he asked softly. "I think I like the other ones better."

"He's a whiteface. In clown society, that's the boss clown. I guess you'd call him the straight guy in the act."

"I'm not sure we want the straight guy."

"He's an instructor, Harry. And he's the one who's agreed to help out. Give him a chance," she scolded. "You've not even met him yet."

The clown stopped a dozen steps away and stood still for a moment, then tucked his head to his chest and did a graceful forward somersault. He landed on his tiptoes, perfectly balanced, in front of the two of them. Lifting an arm out to his side, he wrapped the other around his waist, then swept into an awkward bow. When he stood again, he let his hands drop to his side, then stared, unsmiling, at the two of them.

Harry took a moment to look him over from head to toe.

The face and neck were entirely covered by white paint, his eyebrows and mouth outlined exaggeratedly with thick black lines, the only color on his face the bulbous red rubber nose and two identical trails of little hearts that dripped from the edges of his eyes, down onto his cheeks. He wore a black skullcap, out of which sprouted straight red glossy hair at the sides, draping over his red-painted, slightly grotesque ears. A ruffled white collar circled his neck and shoulders, repeated at his cuffs and ankles, tightly cinched. His costume was a darker shade of red, all of one piece, with baggy legs and arms. The only other colors in his ensemble were the bright yellows, blues and greens of the literally dozens of pockets sewn at odd angles everywhere. Some were clearly flat and empty, while others bulged as if they'd been stuffed. Finishing at his feet, Harry spied two impossibly large, yellow patent leather shoes, pointed out to the sides.

Luna said, "Harry, this is Pockets."

The clown's face remained motionless, as if frozen.

"Yeah, I imagine so," Harry murmured with a slight frown. When the clown still made no move, Harry narrowed his eyes. "All right. This is what I meant. Look at him. He's not funny, he's creepy," he muttered out of the side of his mouth. "And intimidating…and again, not funny."

"Well, you've just let the kneazle out of the bag. He can hear you, Harry."

Finally the clown did move. At least with his lips: he smiled.

"Can't you talk?" Harry asked, becoming impatient.

The clown lifted his hand and squeaked a small, red rubber bulb horn in Harry's face. He pointed first at himself, then at his pockets.

"Yeah, I get it," Harry said. "Your name is Pockets."

Nodding vigorously, the clown tapped his forehead.

"He says you're smart," Luna told Harry. "And he can talk, but not with words. Isn't that right, Pockets?"

"See, the problem is," Harry began, "if you don't talk, I don't know how the kids are gonna react. I mean, how will you even begin to—"

The clown reached deep into one of his pockets and pulled out three red rubber balls. As Harry watched, his mouth hanging open, the clown began to juggle, throwing them expertly and high into the air, even managing to spin around in between catching them. With a sudden move, he pocketed two of them, then leant forward and fastened the last one on Luna's nose. It was then that Harry noticed they weren't balls at all, but rubber clown noses. When Luna seemed startled, the clown squeezed her nose once, producing a definite squeaking noise.

Luna giggled. "Heeeee!"

Harry put his hand to his own nose, as if to protect it, but the clown was off on another gag. He sneezed loudly, then looked guiltily at Harry and Luna. Reaching into a pocket once again, he pulled out the end of a huge yellow handkerchief…and pulled and pulled and pulled, until there was a pile of fabric at his feet. The clown vacillated between blowing his nose, continuing to pull out the handkerchief, and trying to hide the 'evidence' with his sizeable feet.

"Slightly better," Harry said doubtfully.

The clown's eyes grew wide. He stood directly in front of Harry and shook his head as he tapped his own mouth with his palm. Dropping his hand to his chest, he pounded the area over his heart once, then touched his lips again.

"Pockets says when he speaks from his heart, you'll understand," Luna explained. "See, you understood his sneezing problem, didn't you?" she persisted.

Harry would later realize that it was Luna's determination to persuade him that made him give in. He had to admit that she'd never come up with an idea that hadn't worked. Besides, he really did hate saying no to her.

"You can do magic tricks?" The clown nodded. "And you've worked with children before?" Another nod. "And you won't scare them, and you'll back off if I say?"

This time the clown looked skeptical for a moment, then nodded slowly.

Harry sighed heavily. "All right. I'm willing to try you out for a few weeks…probation. I can pay you twenty pounds per week—that's for Monday, Wednesday and Friday, from four to five. If that works out, we might be able to use you when we do special events—parties and so-forth…if you work out. Is that agreeable?"

The clown smiled widely for the first time in the encounter, dropped into a backward somersault, springing up to land on the tips of his toes, and ended by throwing a handful of confetti from out of nowhere into Harry's face.

Luna clapped gleefully. "See! You won't regret it, Harry."

Watching Pockets wave as he headed for the ring, Harry muttered as he spat out confetti, "I already do."

ooOOoo

Harry had to remind himself to stop watching the clown, and watch the children watching the clown, that first day. He found himself mesmerized, though, by Pockets' ability to make something funny out of nothing.

After Harry'd introduced him, Pockets had spent the next ten minutes with a repetitive gag that involved him slipping and falling over an invisible blemish on the floor. At first the children had gasped, then watched as the clown picked himself up and made much ado over brushing himself off…only to fall again and again, stopping to rub at the offending spot with tip of his handkerchief. The gasps became twitters…then giggles as Pocket's frustration grew. In the end, there'd been enthusiastic clapping and cries of disappointment when the bit was finished.

During the teaching time, Harry sat at one side of the table with his shell cups and walnuts. Pockets watched soberly, then used the set Harry'd supplied for him to provide another practice station. At first, all the children queued up in Harry's line, then slowly, one by one, a handful of them relocated to Pockets' side.

As always, Callie remained in the back row of chairs, seated on her mother's lap. Harry was ashamed when he realized he was secretly glad she'd not been won over by the clown. But…she watched him intently.

"You did all right, so…you can come back, I guess," Harry said after all the children had left, and he and Luna and Pockets were standing at the counter.

Luna was outraged. "All right? All right?" she asked incredulously, then turned to Pockets. "Don't mind him, Pockets. You were…" She glowered at Harry. "…terrific!"

"Luna, I said he could come back," Harry said begrudgingly, then was pulled up short when the clown grabbed and hugged him, planting fake kisses on both of his cheeks. He pulled out his bicycle horn and honked it twice, spun in a circle, then hooked his fingers proudly, palms out, underneath a set of invisible suspenders as he puffed out his chest.

"Don't hold anything back, do you?" Harry asked sarcastically.

Pockets rolled his eyes dramatically, then shook his head as he pointed to himself.

"He says that's the clown way—they don't hide what they feel," Luna said confidently.

"What, you speak clown now, do you?"

Harry was amused in spite of himself, watching as Pockets patted Luna fondly atop her head. "We'll see you on Wednesday, then."

With another honk of his horn, the clown danced to the door, then bowed himself out backward.

ooOOoo

Harry watched the clown all that week, increasingly impressed in spite of himself. Each day, Pockets had a set gag routine he performed, then ended by helping Harry with whatever magic trick he'd chosen for that afternoon.

They were sitting around the table, teaching the children a simple sleight of hand trick using pennies, when Harry looked up at the sound of giggling. A little girl had climbed onto Pockets' lap and was delicately fingering the red-button daisy on his chest. Each time she tickled the flower, the clown drew his hands in and hunched his shoulders, then shook with imaginary mirth, which then made the girl

laugh. Pockets would finally stop and reach for the pennies in front of him, when the girl would tickle again… Over and over they repeated the process, until the entire table was watching and giggling along with her.

By the middle of the next week, the children were begging Harry to allow Pockets to give them clowning lessons.

"I'll think about it," Harry murmured. "As far as I'm concerned, he's still on probation," he told Luna, once the shop had emptied and they were standing at the counter again.

Pockets looked stricken, the sides of his mouth turning down as his shoulders slumped in mock distress. Pulling out his yellow handkerchief, he blew his nose loudly. Harry suspected he'd honked that irritating nose beneath the yellow scarf. He had to struggle to keep his face straight.

He waited until Pockets had composed himself to nonchalantly add, "We have a party to do next Monday after closing. Want to come along?"

Eyes wide, the clown jumped up and down, miming a circuit on a trampoline, until he suddenly sprang off to the left and landed on the floor with a thud. He was up in a flash to grab Luna by the hands. Harry watched with mild disgust as the two of them did a little jig in place. Pockets caught his eye and came to stand solemnly before him, then rummaged in one of the deep pockets on his leg. Pulling out a bunch of springy yellow daffodils, he handed them to Harry, then planted a kiss on his cheek.

Wiping it off, Harry told him, "Ten pounds for the party. You think you can figure something out?"

Pockets tapped the side of his forehead and nodded.

Harry rolled his eyes, waving dismissively at the clown, then handed Luna a piece of paper. "Got another letter from the land developers today. They've upped the ante."

Luna took the letter and scanned it briefly. "They don't take no for an answer, do they?"

"Well, not the first time, I guess. No matter, I'm not selling. And neither is anyone else."

"Regis is, and Coffret too," she told him as she handed it back to him.

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise, then seemed to realize the clown was listening with interest. "Group of land developers wants to buy this strip of shops—and put up a fitness center. All of us have to sell, though. So that leaves three of us… I'll never sell," he said with quiet conviction.

Harry was slightly shocked when he saw the clown mouth the word, "Good."

ooOOoo

In the quiet of the night, Harry missed Aiden.

His lover of a year had been gone for six weeks on a book tour. The promise to keep in touch had somehow fallen through, as Harry's emails went unanswered, but Aiden had warned him he'd be busy and not always have access to a computer. This was what Harry told himself and Luna as he tried to account for the silence, but he'd known deep down inside that the end was in sight, even before Aiden had gone. Finding that the man had taken all of his belongings with him only confirmed Harry's suspicions, although most of the time he managed to rationalize that away as well.

They'd been good friends who'd enjoyed each other's company, and filled their lonely nights with satisfying sex. That was what Harry missed the most, if he were honest. Touching another person, holding and being held, rolling over in the middle of the night and realizing he wasn't alone.

For Harry, being alone was the worst part.

He realized that perhaps his standards were a tad low, but he'd spent years alone and didn't much like the feeling. He never sought to bury that feeling in the arms of just anyone, but a warm someone who treated him well and respected his privacy, his need to hide his past…well that was all that Harry believed he could hope for. He thought this a realistic goal, but every once in a while, something in his heart whispered that he deserved better. Harry didn't disagree, but by this time and at his age, he began to wonder if there was someone out there for everyone but himself.

ooOOoo

"So, you've changed your mind, then?" Snape asked him that following Saturday.

Harry tilted his head to the side as he thought. "Well, most of what I was afraid of hasn't happened, so yeah, I guess I have."

Snape made a noise of commiseration. "I think you were wise to be cautious; the wrong sort of clown might've seen your worst fears realized."

Harry frowned slightly. "Severus, are there wizarding clowns? I seem to remember reading about them, but I can't say I've ever actually seen one."

"Oh, there most certainly are, but they only appear in ritualized events—those at Solstice and Equinox, and," he added darkly, "on Samhain. The latter definitely fall into your creepy category."

"Funny, but I can't put my finger on exactly why I think them creepy. It's not like I've ever been to the circus."

Snape eyed him speculatively for a moment, then took a sip of tea. "Context is important. Children aren't

usually afraid of them in circuses or parties… Perhaps in your case…" He shook his head.

"Well, don't stop there," Harry protested. "In my case what?"

Shrugging, Snape answered, "There's a theory that children with an unusual and seemingly unfounded fear of clowns experienced very early episodes of being frightened by facial expressions. Say…of a parent or relative."

"Really?" Harry asked, nonplussed.

"Yes, even as an infant. A mother who contorts her face in sorrow or anger, for example, sets up an anxiety in the child that then carries over into childhood and adulthood."

"I'm not sure how that would apply to me…" Harry said doubtfully.

Snape snorted. "Of, for pity's sake, look at Petunia. I'm certain that horse-faced excuse for an aunt didn't spare you her expressions."

Harry's eyes widened. "That could be it, then?"

"So I've read."

"Pockets doesn't seem to scare me, though."

"Because he's funny; and that's the true test of the clown—to be funny. Think of what your clown—Pockets—does: he runs and plays and makes a mess of things. He doesn't mind his manners. He laughs at himself, and cries and throws tantrums. By doing all of that, he shows himself as vulnerable. He exposes himself honestly to get a laugh. That is what people relate to—someone who connects to them

by being human. He's telling you, 'We are the same, you and I. Let's laugh at both of us.'"

Harry shot him an amused look. "Severus Snape…defender of clowns."

"A bit of psychoanalysis never hurt anyone," Snape said mildly. "Knowing what makes people tick is a useful skill in my line of work," he added dryly.

"I'd wager it is," Harry answered soberly.

ooOOoo

The party the following week went off without a hitch. And Pockets had been on his best behavior, impressing Harry by his sensitivity with children who were reluctant to warm up to him. They'd played games, painted faces, done magic tricks and ended with the clown supplying helium balloons from the tank set up in the corner.

The helium canister, Harry discovered on Wednesday, was a source of entertainment in its own right. He rolled his eyes as Luna and Pockets filled their lungs, then raced around the shop, squeaking out high-pitched screams and one-liners. If Harry'd had any doubt that the clown could talk, he was quickly cured of that notion. He watched them, trying to look disapproving, then had to smile at their silly antics. If only for Luna's sake, Harry had to admit that Pockets was a good thing…

On Friday morning, the shop was quiet as Harry worked at the computer while Luna restocked shelves. He'd finished his inventory update, and was curious about something, so he did some searching….

"Luna…" he said as he tapped his pencil on the counter. "Did you know…that clowns in the Soviet Union were the only ones ever allowed to mock the government? Everyone else ended up in a gulag."

Traipsing down the aisle, Luna reached around and swiveled the monitor so she could see what Harry'd been reading. Her face split into a happy smile. "Harry! You're doing clown research. Why?" she asked him, her eyes shining.

"Not doing research…I was just curious about some things," he muttered self-consciously, wrestling to regain control of the monitor.

As Luna bit her lip, Harry added, "Just thought I should know a bit more about them…seeing as I'm handing over two tenners a week to one."

Luna reached out and patted his hand affectionately. "You can admit it, Harry. You like the clown, don't you?"

Harry grumbled, "Well, I don't know if I'd go so far—"

But the damage had been done. Picking up her basket, Luna turned and skipped toward the back of the shop, sing-songing as she went, "Harry likes the clow-on, Harry likes the clow-on!"

Pursing his lips as he watched her, Harry had to confess that he might…possibly…like…

Pockets had taken to arriving early on Magic Corner days, sometimes by as much as an hour. He busied himself back in the Corner; Harry could hear him clunking around, practicing whatever it was that clowns practiced. He'd wander the shop, examining the wares, and often stood at the counter and watched Harry or Luna work. Harry ended by talking to him, now and then, telling him how he and Luna had been friends at school, and through their shared love for children and parties, had decided to open the shop. He and Pockets managed a rudimentary form of communication, he supposed—short on adverbs and adjectives, but chock full of nouns and…action verbs. And just the day before last, the clown had surprised Harry by slipping into the back room and making them both a cup of tea.

Today Pockets was in one of the aisles, irritating Harry by rotating the squeaky greeting card rack, when the bell over the door made Harry look up.

"Hermione! Ron!" he exclaimed, watching them as they made their way to the counter. "What're you two up to?" he asked as he cleared the space in front of him.

"Hullo, Harry," Ron said as he shook his hand. "We were in the neighborhood, looking for a trike for Rose."

Hermione leant over the counter to kiss Harry on the cheek. "Where's Luna?" she asked.

"Out for the post, should be back soon," he said with a smile. "How's the family? Ginny must be due any day now?"

Ron made a face. "Big as a house, actually. Oliver's on holiday for the next three weeks—hopefully something'll happen soon."

They'd been chatting easily for a few minutes, sharing their news, when Hermione glanced over her shoulder at the squeaking sound, then did a double-take. Looking back to Harry, she leant in closer and murmured, "Is that a clown?"

"Yeah, it is. I hired him on for a while—Luna's idea, actually, but he seems to be working out." At Ron's blank look, he added, "For the children's hour." He looked toward the aisle and caught Pockets squinting at them, so waved him over.

The clown slowly made his way to the front of the shop as the three of them watched, then casually leant against the end of the counter a few feet away.

"This is Ron and Hermione, friends of mine from school. And this is Pockets, my…clown." Harry sighed audibly when the clown only stared at them.

"Harry…." Hermione said uncertainly, still eyeing Pockets. "He seems a bit…scary."

"Nah, the kids love him…well, most of them do," he said as he waved a hand, frowning at the straight-faced clown. "He sort of…grows on you," he said a bit defensively when he saw the look of disbelief on Ron's face.

"Doesn't he talk?" Ron asked, still eyeing Pockets suspiciously.

"No," Harry said. "But I can understand him."

The clown made a series of hand gestures, including one that involved cupping his arse, then ended by standing up straight, facing Ron. Harry saw the hand slip into the pocket, and a split second later, a steady stream of water squirted from the flower on his chest, making Ron jump back in surprise.

"Hey!" he protested, wiping at his shirt. "That was rude!" Hermione giggled, so Pockets reached over and patted her cheek affectionately.

Harry laughed then too. Nodding at Ron, he said, "He says you're a berk who needs a laughing enema, and that Hermione's a sweetheart."

Hermione beamed at the clown, as Ron muttered, "How you got all that from what he just did…"

With an elegant bow for Hermione, and a tongue stuck out at Ron, Pockets wandered away to the back of the shop.

A short time later, the two of them left, promising to get together soon. The moment the bell at the door signaled they'd gone, Pockets returned. He and Harry studied each other soberly. When the clown cupped his arse again and nodded, Harry understood.

"Well, that's what you meant, wasn't it? I think I got what you said right."

Pockets nodded.

"Well, they're my friends, from way back, and Ron's not a berk; he's got a great sense of humor." When the clown raised a dubious eyebrow, Harry told him, "He's just one of those people who're not fond of clowns, I guess. You've probably met a lot of those."

The clown nodded, then slipped his hand into a pocket. Harry braced himself, but Pockets pulled out several packages of balloons he'd taken from the shelves, and placed them on the counter.

Harry ignored them for a moment as he stared at the clown. "I wish you'd talk," he said impulsively. "Underneath…all of that, I suspect there's a fairly interesting person. I'd wager you have quite a bit to say… How old are you anyway?" he asked, suddenly filled with all the questions he'd wanted to ask the clown for weeks.

Pockets wagged a forbidding finger at him in a definite 'no-no' gesture, then pointed to the balloons.

"Oh. You want to buy these, then?" When the clown nodded, Harry did the sum in his head, then told him, "Two quid."

He watched in amazement as the clown began to empty his pockets out onto the counter: scarves, clown noses, a seltzer bottle, and several small bags of confetti that Harry eyed warily. "Guess that's why they call you Pockets, huh?"

Pockets tapped his temple, then pointed at Harry.

"You think I'm smart, eh? Brown-noser," he scoffed as he took the fiver.

The clown feigned shock, his thick black eyebrows arching almost up under the skullcap. Crossing his eyes to look down at his red nose, he gingerly squeaked it, then shook his head.

"You know what I meant," Harry scolded mildly as he handed him his change.

The clown gave him a rare smile, then nodded.

"So…" Harry persisted, "I'm just curious about you…"

Pockets pointed at his chest in question, raising his eyebrows again, then looked behind himself.

"Not Pockets, you. The person you are without…the suit," Harry said softly. "Do you have a family…a father and mother?"

Pockets shrugged and looked at his yellow shoes.

"Wife?"

Now the clown looked up, making a face that Harry was glad the children had never seen. Then he shook his head vehemently.

"So, no wife. How about…clown friends?"

Making a show of counting to three on his fingers, the clown nodded, then brightened as he pointed to Harry and then the shop door.

"Oh, Luna and me. Yeah, I guess we are. So…what do you do when…you're not clowning? With your

time off?"

Pockets tapped the books piled on the counter, then pointed to Harry's small CD player. Finally, he pillowed his hands together and laid his head on them, then made the motions of shoveling food into his mouth.

Harry asked slyly, "What, no girlfriend?"

Pockets shook his head with his tongue hanging out.

"Don't you get lonely…you know, for a bit of female companionship?"

Pulling a bag of skinny-sized balloons from a pocket, the clown took one out, then glanced furtively around the shop. Harry watched, transfixed, as Pockets effortlessly blew the bright pink balloon halfway up. With an outright grin for Harry this time, the clown held the balloon at his crotch and made wanking motions around it, jutting his hips lewdly back and forth.

Harry guffawed. "Well, that's one solution." He sobered, then sighed. "I know exactly what you mean. Don't let the kids see you doing that, though." Harry stood up straighter as he realized… "Hey! You can do balloons? The funny hats and animals?"

Pockets looked downright insulted, then nodded as he rolled his eyes.

"You've been holding out on us," Harry murmured, but Pockets only shook his head.

When the bell jangled again, Harry nodded at the clown. "Luna's back with the post."

"Hullo, Pockets," Luna said with a bright smile as she handed Harry the post. "Nothing much," she said as Harry began to sort through it. "Oh. There's another letter from Aegis." She shrugged at Pockets. "The

people who want to buy the shop."

The clown grimaced and made a cutting motion at his throat.

"They don't give up, do they?" Harry muttered, still leafing through the envelopes.

Luna hesitated for a moment, then said quietly, "Nothing from Aiden."

Harry looked up guiltily, then when he saw both Luna and Pockets studying him sympathetically, he shrugged resignedly and told them, "There won't be. He emailed me yesterday. He's not coming back."

"Oh. Harry, I'm sorry," Luna said as she reached over the counter to hug him.

Harry let her for a moment, then pushed her away. "No surprise, really. I was hoping…but things just didn't work out. Not a very good match, I guess."

"Aiden was Harry's boyfriend," Luna told the clown, who was watching Harry. At Luna's words, Pockets placed his hand over his heart and nodded at Harry.

"Thanks, Pockets, I appreciate that."

"Well, it's hard when you couldn't be honest with him about…certain things…" Luna trailed off at the look on Harry's face.

"Luna…" he warned, not missing that the clown was frowning perplexedly.

ooOOoo

That night, Harry lay on his side in the bed, watching the moonlight filter in through the curtains to make shapes on his wall. So…Aiden was history, one of only a handful of men that Harry'd let into his life. Things always seemed to start off well, but as time went by, it was almost as if the men he chose lost interest. He had some regrets this time, and as he'd told them that day, he was hardly surprised. But with the reality came the cold weight of solitude, heavier than ever.

He smiled as he thought of the clown and his outrageous pink balloon. Sighing, Harry rolled to his back and slipped his boxers down. Pockets was right—sometimes all that was left was for a man to do was to take himself in hand.

ooOOoo

"So…" Harry said to Luna, eyeing the clown standing at the end of the counter, "…next week is the hospital visit. I figured we'd do the usual—your cupcakes, some magic tricks, we have the pressies in the back…."

Luna followed his line of sight. "What about him? Should we take him?" she asked softly.

"I'm not sure. We have to be careful. Remember that clown study…kids in hospitals don't like them."

Luna made a tsking sound. "No, kids in hospitals don't like clown-themed décor. Not the same thing, Harry."

Their conversation was cut short as the door to the shop opened; two men in suits entered and stood for a moment as they looked around the interior.

Luna stepped toward them. "Can I help you?"

The larger of the two men looked her up and down in a way that made Harry immediately dislike him. The other man walked off in the opposite direction, taking a leisurely tour of the shop.

"I'm looking for the owner," the man said, looking down at a paper in his hand. "Mr. Potter."

"I'm Mr. Potter," Harry said, standing from his stool behind the counter.

Taking two long steps, the man held out his hand. "I'm Laurence Morgan, Aegis Development Corporation."

Harry shook his hand briefly, then sat again. "Ah yes, we've got your letters, and your generous…offers," he added with a trace of sarcasm.

The man looked dismissively at Luna, then squinted suspiciously at Pockets, who was inching his way along the counter toward them. "Perhaps we should talk in private?"

Harry smiled wryly as he shook his head. "This is my staff. Anything you have to say, they should hear as well."

Morgan's face hardened slightly. "Very well. You should know, Mr. Potter, that we've secured three of the five properties now, and believe we'll soon come to agreement with your neighbor."

"Lewis must've caved," Harry told Luna conversationally, then looked back to the man. "Well, that leaves Julian and myself." He leant forward over the counter. "And I'll tell you now—you can stop wasting your time, because hell will freeze over before either of us sell," he finished in a low, intense voice.

The man stared at him for a moment. "Everyone has their price, I've found. So what will it be, Mr. Potter?

I've no doubt that you'll eventually come around. Aegis is very motivated to get on with this project, and waiting for hell to freeze over, as you say, isn't remotely on our agenda." He lowered his voice. "What will it take to convince you to leave? There are other…methods besides monetary incentives. You might want to keep that in mind."

Harry blinked twice, then gestured toward the door. "Get out, and take your friend with you," he menaced, only vaguely aware that the clown was standing beside the man.

Morgan tried to backpedal. "Mr. Potter, we're all reasonable men." He held out his hands palms up. "There's no reason for this process to become unpleas—"

He was cut short by the sound of Pockets' horn blaring in his ear. Jumping, he made a grab for the clown, who was quicker off the mark. Poking him in the chest with his horn, Pockets took another step forward, and for the first time, Harry appreciated just how tall the clown was.

Morgan scowled at the clown. "Back off—touch me again and I'll—"

Pockets moved like lightening, using both hands to push the man toward the door.

"You'd better leave now, Mr. Morgan. I can't be responsible for what he'll do if you don't," Harry called at the stumbling figure. He and Luna snickered as both men beat a hasty retreat, shouting obscenities at the clown who chased them into the street. Peering through the shop window, they saw Pockets' parting shot: a handful of confetti thrown at their backs.

That afternoon when the children came, Harry watched the clown with renewed interest. Although he'd scolded him that he could take care of himself, he knew that Pockets wasn't fooled; Harry hadn't hidden the gratitude in his eyes, nor his glee that his clown had rained down a wrath of confetti.

God, he hated confetti….

Harry'd taught the children how to use Chinese linking rings as the magic part of their lesson, and now Pockets was doing his wind-down act. He really was a rather large man, Harry noted. His hands were slender but agile, his shoulders broad, and even though his suit hid any musculature that might've been there, Harry guessed that it had to be, considering the clowns acrobatic flexibility.

He also had an endearing and poignant grace about him as he stood there, all eyes on him as he pulled flower after flower from one pocket, then another. With each one, he leant over the group of chairs to bestow it on one of the children. Harry knew that every single child would receive one, as well as Luna…Pockets' biggest fan.

How strange…everyone had got a gift from Pockets that day…even Harry.

But then Harry noticed…there was still one child without a flower—the little redheaded girl seated on her mother's lap in the very last row.

Callie.

Pockets frowned as he patted his pockets. First the ones on his chest, then the numerous others on his sleeves and trouser legs. He stood and made a sad face, his lips turned down as he mournfully studied the little girl, who stared back, her big blue eyes wide.

Suddenly, the clown staggered in place as he held up a finger to the group, signaling for them to wait. As he slowly smiled, Pockets slid his right hand into the side-slot pocket of his trousers. Deeper and deeper his arm went, up to his elbow. There wasn't a sound in the room as he rummaged and poked in the deep recesses, then with a smooth and practiced grand flourish, he produced a bunch of yellow-striped pansies, holding them up proudly for all to see, taking tiny bows toward the group and to Harry and Luna at the side.

Then Pockets did something that boggled Harry's mind: he swayed. First to the left…and then to the right. The entire group of children swayed with him, their hands outstretched, begging for the bunch of posies. He swayed backward then, so far, in fact, that Harry was on the verge of jumping behind him, so sure he was that the clown was about to fall.

But he slowly righted himself, and in that moment, the room became silent again, as Pockets leant forward. No hands were up this time, as it was clear for whom the flowers were intended. Reaching over the first row of children, Pockets swayed forward, almost as if his shoes were glued to the floor…then over the second row…to the third.

In a flash, Harry saw Callie's hands come up at the exact moment that Pockets dropped the bunch of flowers into her lap. She caught them, mid-drop, then brought them up to her nose. The other children clapped wildly as Callie smiled around the pansies. Pockets had straightened and was watching her with a satisfied smile.

And though it was noisy, and her voice small, Harry saw her lips form the words: Thank you, Pockets!

"That, Luna," Harry murmured as the children began to leave, Callie's eyes still shining, "was magic." He watched the clown for a moment longer, then, when he caught his eye, gave a nod of approval. "By the way, I think we should take him on the hospital gig."

ooOOoo

That Friday afternoon, after the children had gone, the three of them sat down in the back room to discuss the hospital visit on Sunday.

"This isn't like a party," Harry told the clown solemnly. "These kids are sick, some of them dying. We keep everything fairly quiet—they do better with one-on-one activities. Luna takes cupcakes for them to decorate, I do a few magic tricks, and we give them pressies. And talk to them." He paused for a moment, just about to warn Pockets about his usual exuberance, then he stopped.

He realized that he truly didn't have any worries about Pockets' instincts anymore. The clown seemed to intuitively know what was too much…and what was appropriate. Harry thought to himself that they really were a team, each one of them with a gift that would appeal to the children who so desperately

needed a distraction, if only for the space of an hour or two.

"Since this is extra, I'll be paying you for the afternoon," he told Pockets.

The clown held up his hand and shook his head. 'No,' he mouthed.

And for a moment, Harry wanted to hug the man…but of course, he contented himself with a smile and a nod of his head.

ooOOoo

The next day, Saturday, Harry found himself at a loose end in the afternoon. The Minister wouldn't be in Victoria Park to meet him, as he was whisking away his beautiful wife for the weekend to celebrate their seventh wedding anniversary.

Harry sat in the back room of the shop, flipping through the telly channels, thinking morosely to himself, See, everyone has someone…even Severus Snape.

ooOOoo

They met at the shop on Sunday to gather what they would take to the hospital. Each of them carried a large shopping bag, filled to the brim with supplies.

"You have what you'll need?" Harry asked the clown.

Pockets stared at him, then patted his…pockets.

"Oh. Right, well, we're off, then."

The hospital visit was an event that Luna and Harry did every other month. They set up their things in a dayroom, then the children began to arrive at precisely two o'clock. Some of them walked with a nurse or a parent, some were in wheelchairs, but all of them were eager and grateful.

There was a table set up for Luna and her cupcake decorating, and a semi-circular one where Harry sat to do his magic tricks. As he worked, the children came and went, and as Harry had told the clown, it was all very low-key and non-stressful. Quiet activities that would entertain, but more importantly, soothe and distract. He could hear the low murmur of Luna's voice as she read from a large storybook, while the children iced their cupcakes and decorated them with sprinkles and jimmies.

Harry often found that during these visits he had a lump in his throat as he worked, watching their drawn faces, seeing their sometimes bald heads and painfully bruised arms adorned with intravenous apparatuses, a tube in a nose here, a splint to a limb there. But they didn't ever whinge or complain.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Pockets, who'd stood when the children had first begun to arrive, then had moved quietly off to sit on a tiny chair at the front of the room. Strangely, he made no move to interact with the small patients at all. He'd crossed his legs and rooted in his pockets, then leant down to lay out an array of skinny balloons to one side on the floor.

Seeming in his own little world, he began to blow up balloons, one by one; his first creation was a gold and brown giraffe, skillfully twisted so that it stood on its own four feet. Setting it in front of him, he started on the next one. Soon, an elephant and then a turtle joined the giraffe on the floor.

By this time, he'd attracted attention, and then over the next two animals, a small audience of children stood in front and watched as he worked. Harry waited for it to happen, and it didn't take long. Finally, a little boy in striped pajamas reached out to tentatively touch the giraffe, and in the next instant, Pockets had smiled and handed it to him, miming an 'it's for you' gesture.

Then he couldn't make them fast enough, and suddenly he'd diversified into balloon hats, which turned out to be even more popular. Harry did his magic tricks now for children sporting balloons on their heads, and he crowed inwardly at how the clown had suddenly seemed to animate the lot of them. Smiling happily, Harry concentrated on the tricks in front of him, gratified when a nurse leant down and murmured at his ear, "The clown was a wonderful idea, Harry."

Yes, the clown had been a wonderful idea, from the very start, Harry had to admit. He realized that Luna was worth her weight in gold, not only because she was his best friend, but because she had this gift for knowing what children wanted and, an even rarer gift, what they needed the most. And now it seemed that Pockets had that same sensitivity. Harry felt suddenly filled with warmth, and strangely humbled.

Their time was up, and the children were saying goodbye as the three of them passed out small gifts for them to take back to their wards. A nurse came and pulled Harry aside for a moment; when he returned, he gave Luna a meaningful look as he told them, "There's a little boy who wanted to come, but couldn't. He's up on the fifth floor, and his mother has asked if the clown could stop by." He saw Pockets' eyes grow large as he nodded. Harry added in a low voice as they headed for the lift, "He's dying, just so you know."

ooOOoo

As they walked down the fifth-floor hallway, Harry told Pockets, "He's eight, and his name is Mattie. He usually comes to the dayroom, but I guess he's not able to now."

They entered the private room; bright sunlight was streaming in through the curtains, the walls were covered with cards and drawings, and the bed was littered with an assortment of stuffed animals. But the sight of the forlorn little boy in the middle of it made Harry's heart constrict.

Nodding at Mattie's mother, who discreetly removed herself to a chair by the door, Harry approached the bed, only vaguely aware that Pockets had headed for a chair on the far wall, opposite the foot of the bed.

"Hey, Mattie. Missed you today," Harry said softly as he took a chair and angled it so he could see the boy.

Mattie seemed to be eyeing the clown a bit fearfully as he answered, "I can't eat anymore, so my legs won't work."

"Well, mine do, so I thought I'd come up and see you. Pockets, there, wanted to come as well." The clown had already laid out his balloons on the floor and was slowly blowing up a bright blue skinny.

Harry and Mattie watched him for a moment, Harry threading his hand through the bed rails to gently hold the fragile little fingers. "I think he's making you something." When the boy craned his neck to see better, Harry leant over and propped his pillow to help him.

"He's a very sad clown," Mattie observed aloud.

"That's just the way he looks right now," Harry told him. He considered the boy for a moment, then added, "Sometimes people look one way on the outside, but are quite another on the inside." He paused, then squinted at Mattie. "You look very, very brave to me."

Mattie studied him for a moment, then looked at the clown. "You mean…he's happy on the inside?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, he is. It's just part of his clown act sometimes, to look sad. But…it's all right to let people see both the outside and the inside, Mattie."

Seeming to digest this, the boy cast a furtive look toward his mother by the door, then said more softly to Harry, "I'm afraid on the inside."

Squeezing his hand, Harry said, "But brave on the outside."

"If I show I'm afraid, or if I cry, then Mummy is sad and she cries too."

A slight sound at the foot of the bed made Harry look up to see Pockets standing there. "I think…your mum needs to be sad and cry sometimes too, Mattie. She's sad you're sick."

There was a pause as the child eyed the clown. "And I'm dying."

Harry caught Pockets' eyes. "Yes, that too. But…sometimes when you share a feeling, it makes both people feel better." He gently stroked the boy's hand, then angled his head so he could look him in the eyes. "If your mum knew you were hiding being sad and afraid just for her…that would make her feel even sadder."

"Do you really think so?" the child asked doubtfully.

Harry nodded. "Take Pockets here. He's like your mum in a way. When I'm sad, do you know what he likes to do?"

Mattie shook his head, watching as the clown rounded the bed and came to stand at Harry's side. Without any prompting, Pockets patted Harry on the head, then rubbed him soothingly on the back. Taking out the yellow handkerchief, he dabbed at Harry's eyes, then finished by hugging him. Pulling out the two blown-up balloons sticking out of his pockets, he quickly fashioned them into a simple hat. After fixing it on Harry's head, he pulled out a bright red clown nose and fastened it to Harry's nose, squeaking it once when he was finished.

Mattie smiled for the first time since they'd come. "My mummy can't make balloon animals," he said in a whisper.

Pockets looked shocked and shook his head, while Harry smiled and said, "No, I imagine not, but if she knows you're sad, Mattie, she'll want to do all those other things that Pockets did. You just have to tell her how you feel, so you can both feel better, all right?"

The boy nodded, looking curiously at the clown, his eyes growing wider as Pockets blew up more balloons and placed them one by one atop the sheet.

"Now, tell Pockets what animal you'd like him to make."

When they left a few minutes later, Mattie was sitting serenely with his mother, hat on his head and giraffe in hand, with a red clown nose on his face.

Harry and Pockets took the lift down, Harry staying silent, and of course, the clown didn't have a word to say either. Glancing at Pockets, Harry saw the tears leaking out of the sides of his eyes. Reaching an arm around the man's shoulders, Harry gave him an empathetic squeeze and simply said, "I know."

ooOOoo

"All right. Show me what you've got," Harry directed the clown as he leant his elbows on the counter to watch.

Pockets bowed first, then pulled a bright red floppy hat from a pocket. Holding it out in front of him, he made a grand production of extricating a small white ball from a tiny pocket on his chest. He held it up for his audience—Harry—to see, then placed it inside the hat. Carefully sliding the hat atop his head, he held both arms to the side for a moment, then slowly…slowly, his lips spread, revealing a white ball. He blew the ball out forcefully, then batted it so that Harry reflexively reached up to catch it.

"Hey! That was…" Harry stopped as he realized the ball was wet. "Ewww, that's disgusting. I don't think Luna will want to…" He stopped, watching as another white ball made its appearance, but this time he stepped deftly to the side and let it fall to the floor behind the counter when the clown sent it his way. "All right, that's impressive, but you're going to have to do something about…" He ducked as the clown spat the third ball in his direction. And then a fourth…fifth…and finally, a sixth.

Harry frowned as he bent over and picked up the slightly damp sponge balls with his fingertips; when they were all lined up on the counter, he shook his head in amazement at the clown. "You fit all of those in there, did you?"

Pockets stood on his tiptoes and held his hands out to both sides in a 'Ta da!" gesture.

"Well, I think you'll have to work this out with Luna. She might not want to catch these, being that they're…wet." His eyes widened as Pockets smiled, only to eject one final ball.

Eyeing the balls, Harry had to admit, "That one talented mouth you've got there."

Pockets smiled widely, his expressive gray eyes sparkling as he bent his knees and lewdly palmed his crotch.

Harry's eyebrows shot up. Had the clown just..? "Don't let the children see you do that," he said dryly, amused in spite of himself when Pockets soundlessly mimicked his words at the exact same moment as Harry said them.

The sound of the bell at the door made them both look to the side. Pockets let out a wheeze of delight as Luna sedately walked down the aisle toward them, that…huge, horribly grotesque Gryffindor lion perched atop her head.

"Hullo, Pockets," she said with a smile as she handed Harry the post. He shuffled through it, ignoring the two of them as they did a short version of ring-around-the-rosy in front of the counter.

Looking up, he pointed to the hat. "You wore that to collect the post?"

"Of course. It's been sitting in the back, feeling neglected for months. Time to take it out and show it the

neighborhood, I thought."

Harry guffawed. "So…got a few strange looks, did you?" he asked with a snort.

"Oh, not really. They expect it of me by now. I think they consider me the local color, Harry," she said serenely.

"Loco color's more like it," Harry said with a smile.

"So, Pockets, did Harry tell you about his visitors last night?"

Harry rolled his eyes, watching as Pockets shook his head.

"Those two loons from the development company stopped by at closing."

Harry cocked his head to the side, stifling the urge to laugh aloud. "Not loons, Luna. Goons."

Seeming puzzled, Luna shook her head. "No, I think it's loons. After the birds. I should know; after all, Harry, I'm the one they called loony. After the birds, of course, because it also means crazy, and that's what everyone thought I was at Hogwarts. Of course, loons—the birds, not the development men—are related to the wizarding Augurey. My father and I tried to get close to a nest of them once, but of course it was too dangerous. If you hear them wail, well then you—"

"Luna," Harry said lowly and pointedly, jerking his head in the clown's direction. "I think you've just let the kneazle out of the bag…in a big way."

Pockets had been swiveling his head from Luna to Harry as they spoke, a frown on his face. 'Kneazle?" he mouthed.

"It's a sort of cat, actually a mix of—"

"Luna!" Harry said in exasperation. He looked apologetically at Pockets. "Don't mind her, she really is a bit loony," he said darkly in Luna's direction.

Luna smiled fondly at him. "All right. The goons came to see Harry again last night."

The clown raised an eyebrow at Harry, shrugged and lifted his palms upward in a 'And what?' gesture.

"And I didn't even let them in the door. I had my cell phone out in a heartbeat, and told them if they came around again, I'd call the police. They said they'd see about that, but then they left, so that's that."

Pockets didn't seem convinced, looking almost worried. He made a cutting motion at his neck.

"Well, let's hope we won't need to go that far," Harry told him. Glancing down at the counter, he smiled slyly. "Luna, I think Pockets needs you to help him play with his balls."

The clown's mouth dropped open, then he shocked Harry by positively leering at him as he slowly clapped in appreciation. Harry bent over in a small bow.

"Harry, I don't think Fred would like that," Luna said disapprovingly, looking from one to the other.

Pointing to the sponge balls on the counter, he said, "These balls, Luna. But watch out when you do; there's a surprise twist at the end."

"Oh, those balls. That can be arranged. Come with me, my merry jester."

Pockets gathered the balls up, smirking at Harry, then skipped down the aisle after Luna skipping ahead of him.

ooOOoo

That night as they were about to close, Harry said nonchalantly. "Luna, I think Pockets is gay."

"Well of course he's gay. He's a clown."

"No, not that sort of gay. I mean gay. You know, as in queer."

"That's what I meant as well, Harry. Why would that surprise you? He's an entertainer, he knows how to listen to people with his heart, and he's sensitive and funny."

"What? So you're saying straight men aren't funny or sensitive?"

Luna shrugged. "Not in my experience, no."

"You happen to be engaged to a very straight, sensitive, funny bloke. Remember him?" Harry reminded her sarcastically.

Shooting him a withering look as she flipped the door sign to 'closed', Luna replied, "Fred Weasley is the funniest, dearest, most sensitive man I know—he's an exception, I think."

"You said it, not me," Harry said wryly, thinking of all the times he'd seen Fred's less than sensitive side.

"He's considerate, he knows exactly what I like, and the way he makes me feel, Harry….mmmm. Just last weekend, he woke me up in the middle of the night, and do you know what he—"

"Luna! Too much, too much. Stop. Stop," he laughed at the blank look on her face. "That belongs to you and Fred. Gay men don't usually want the gory details."

"Oh, your loss, then," she smiled, not in the least bit embarrassed. "But you're right about Pockets; I knew it from the start."

"Yeah, makes sense the gay man here would be the last to figure it out," Harry muttered to himself as Luna headed for the back of the shop.

ooOOoo

Harry wouldn't say he was obsessed with the clown, but he did think of him a great deal now. Over the past two weeks especially, he'd become increasingly curious about…well, about the gentle man beneath the clown suit. He was clearly a sensitive person, one who was fond of children, and funny as well. Harry wondered what his story might be…how he'd ended up as a clown, what things were important to him, why he'd become attached to Harry and Luna and the shop, because it was clear that he was, as well as loyal to the point of defending their right to run their business.

"I wish you'd talk to me, I mean really talk," Harry told Pockets one afternoon when they were alone at the counter.

Pockets pointed to his chest, then flipped his forefinger over his lips as he nodded.

"Yeah, well, not that sort of talking. You can make yourself, I don't know, understood. But you have to

admit there's a…lack of depth to what you say."

The clown leant against the counter, pursing his lips, then frowned. Reaching out, he caught one of Harry's hands, then ran a finger along the edge of Harry's fingernails.

Surprised, Harry didn't pull his hand away, but only laughed. "Yeah, I bite them. Old habit. Ever since I was a child." He squinted at Pockets' fingers. "Not you, I see. God, you look like you have them manicured," he murmured.

Shaking his head, the clown pointed to himself proudly.

"Part of that total makeup philosophy, huh?" Harry asked, watching as the clown stood and stared at him solemnly as he bobbed his head up and down. Suddenly, Harry didn't know exactly why, but he felt like finally confessing to the clown. "You know, Luna's the one who wanted you here."

Pockets drummed his fingers on the countertop, then yawned.

"She had to talk me into it, actually. I didn't want you at all," he said softly. He knew Pockets had to already know this, but was curious to see what his reaction would be.

The eyes in the painted face slid up to meet Harry's, and ever so slowly, he was able to raise just a single eyebrow. Harry was impressed by the maneuver in spite of himself.

The clown seemed to have total mastery over even the smallest muscles of his body.

"And now…" Harry swallowed once. "Now I look forward to the days you come. I know the children do too, and that's part of it, but it's more than that for me. You've done more than you know here, for both Luna and myself. And I just wanted to thank you…and tell you I’m sorry I didn't want you from the start. You're part of the team, Pockets, and I can't imagine us without you."

The clown raised the other eyebrow, looking shocked. His appearance was so silly that Harry laughed aloud. Pockets stood up straight, twirled in place, honked his horn, then reached into his pocket, making Harry come to life.

"No confetti!" Harry protested, just as Pockets threw a handful.

Grinning widely, the clown was unapologetic, watching gleefully as Harry picked the paper bits from his face. "All right, we have to come to an understanding about the confetti," Harry muttered darkly as the clown held his sides and shook with pretended mirth.

They both looked to the back, at the sound of Luna singing. The clown pointed in her direction, then hugged himself, twisting from side-to-side.

"Yeah, I love Luna too," Harry smiled. "But what I just told you…about me liking you; that'll be our little secret, all right? Otherwise, she'll be off to get a…monkey or a parrot or something. I have to be the voice of reason here," he added almost regretfully.

Pockets used a hand to pantomime zipping and locking his lips, then tossed the invisible key to the side. His eyes shining, he nodded as Harry laughed out loud again.

ooOOoo

"You're sure?" Snape asked him that Saturday afternoon.

"Well, I've not seen anyone," Harry admitted. "But you know I'm not paranoid about things like this. It's a sense I've got, that's all."

"Hmmm, and your senses in the past proved fairly accurate, if I recall correctly."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, see, and that's the only reason I think it's actually happening. It's probably those development people, although why they'd follow me when I close up doesn't make much sense."

Snape shook his head. "Certainly it does. Considering they've moved to intimidation tactics. They're just taking it to the next step. I know I needn't advise you to be cautious," Snape murmured with a frown.

"Wand in hand, cross the street erratically, look over my shoulder, yeah, I'm doing it all. So far, nothing. But someone's there. Won't get close to me, though."

"See that they don't. Muggle or not, don't hesitate to defend yourself. And if you'd like, I could arrange some surveillance. "

Smiling, Harry replied. "You mean Aurors? Checking to make sure poor little Harry Potter's bad boys keep their mitts to themselves?"

Snape obviously didn't find the matter funny. "I'd rather do that than have to claim your body from the Muggle morgue," he said scathingly, then made a face. "See that you pay attention."

"Give me a bit of credit, Severus. I made it through the war, with nary a snake bite on my neck."

"Touché ," the Minister muttered.

"So, how's Teddy?" Harry asked brightly. "And Tonks?"

"Nymphadora is nesting already. I've been instructed to build a crib, not purchase one. And I've promised Teddy that I'll take him to your shop on a Saturday. Two weeks from today—will that be convenient? He's

been badgering me for months, because I've not seen it yet."

"Oh, I can't imagine why not," Harry retorted dryly. "I've only been there for five friggin' years. Yeah, two weeks from today will be fine. Around ten would be good."

They sat quietly for a while, Harry tossing out bits of biscuits to the pigeons.

"So… your Aiden…" Snape began.

"Not coming back," Harry said quietly. "I've done it again—managed to scare off a perfectly normal, good-looking—"

"Imbecile."

Harry looked sideways at him. "I wouldn't call him an imbecile."

Snape shot him a withering look. "Not him. You."

Sitting up straighter, Harry frowned. "Why me?"

"Because a Muggle relationship will never last," Snape said shortly. "There's too much you must conceal. Any man you manage to get close enough to will realize that you're hiding a large part of yourself. So, deal with it, and move on. I've not said this before, but you're wasting your life on unsuitable…partners. Do yourself a favor—and all of us who care about you—and face the truth. Time to make your peace with who you are, and where your place is."

"I like my life the way it is," Harry muttered. "I love my shop, and what I do—"

"Oh, for god's sake, that's not what I meant and you know it. Keep your shop, what the bloody hell do I care? But if you don't want to end up alone for good, then look to your own kind." His face softened. "You deserve to be happy."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. So did Lupin. Look where it got him." He looked at Snape guiltily. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that as…since you…I shouldn't have…"

"He died and I married his wife. Nothing for you to apologize over." Snape paused. "He would be happy for us, I think." He glanced at Harry pointedly. "And, Lupin would tell you exactly what I have. If you can't accept it from me, well, then from him."

"I'll think about it," Harry agreed, if only to change the subject.

ooOOoo

That niggling feeling that he wasn't alone persisted—on both Saturday and Sunday nights when Harry finally pushed himself out the door to head for home. But as he'd told Snape, he saw no one, and was starting to wonder if he was becoming slightly paranoid.

On Monday evening, he stayed later than he usually did. The street out front was lit by the street lamps as he shut the interior lights down. He stood at the door and peered through the panes before cautiously undoing the lock. He'd just begun to let himself out, when they struck.

The door was pushed inward, and Harry stumbled backward. There were two of them, that he could see, stepping over the threshold and then hurtling toward him.

One taller than the other, the set of the broad shoulders familiar even in the light streaming in from the

street.

Harry's hand went down to his pocket and his fingers closed around his wand, just as the figure made a lunge. The man was almost on top of him as Harry brought his hand up, his mouth already forming the words of a Shield Charm. Suddenly, a whoosh of sound and energy threw Harry backward, causing him to careen into a carousel of merchandise. Struggling to right himself, Harry lost the battle as he fell, his head hitting the metal base of the fixture with an audible crack, then the world went dark.

ooOOoo

The shop was largely intact, but it'd taken Luna and Harry the better part of an hour to repair the damage, magically, in between astonished and concerned customers. The police had been there to take a report, of course, and they'd been filled in about the prior run-ins with Aegis Corporation. Their faces had become grim when Harry'd related this information; it appeared he'd not been the only one in the row of shops to be on the receiving end of such intimidation.

Harry was slightly puzzled when Pockets appeared just as the police were leaving.

"I called the school and asked him to come," Luna explained. "We're all in this together. Besides, I knew he'd want to know."

The clown nodded vigorously, his expressive face almost thunderous beneath its makeup, the lips drawn down in a moue of concern. He reached around and used his fingers to prod at the sizeable lump at the back of Harry's head.

Harry stood there resignedly and let him do it. For some reason, he felt strangely comforted and reassured by the…rather large clown presence. When he was finished, Pockets led Harry into the back room, Luna following along behind them. The clown seemed to take charge of the two of them, gesturing them to the overstuffed chairs as he made a pot of tea. When they'd all been served, the clown pulled up a chair opposite them, then pointed at Harry and then touched his lips.

"He says, 'Talk,' Harry," Luna said. "And this time, tell us all of it. I don't think you did," she chided.

"Well, that's because I don't want the police to…" He stopped at the look on the clown's face. "All right."

Pockets reached forward and patted his hand, then sat back in his chair, his large gray eyes fastened on Harry.

"I don't know…exactly what happened. I was about to lock up, and had just opened the door, when they pushed their way in."

"The development men?" Luna asked.

"Didn't see their faces, but yeah, I'm sure it was." He took a sip of his tea, grimacing at the pain in his neck when he tilted his head down. "We sort of struggled…and I managed to get my….er…" He glanced at Luna and shot her a look of distress. "…weapon out, and that's when I fell and hit my head. I think…I…er…managed to get a…shot off, though. Probably scared them off, because when I came to, they were gone. And the shop door was closed."

"You have a gun, Harry?" Luna asked incredulously.

Harry pursed his lips at her in disgust, then glanced at Pockets. "Of course I don't have a gun! I…I…" He lowered his voice and said it as quickly as he could, thinking that perhaps this way the clown would miss most of it. "I think I got a Protego off. Must be what threw me backwards, casting the spell at such close range."

Eyes wide, Luna whispered, "Well, you've just let the kneazle out of the bag this time." She looked at him accusingly, then smiled at Pockets. "It's a sort of cat."

"Luna," Harry groaned, "you're just making it worse. Pockets, I have a sort of…weapon, and that's probably what scared them off. Good thing, too." He muttered under his breath at Luna, "It's so easy to think he might not hear well since he doesn't talk."

Pockets stared from one to the other, his mouth hanging open. He shook his head so hard that his cheeks jiggled, then continued to stare at Harry, his eyes calculating. Finally, he lifted his hand and made a gun with his fingers. Resting it on his arm, he aimed in the direction of the front of the shop.

"Yeah, sort of like that," Harry said, unable to meet his eyes for a moment. When he finally looked up, the clown wagged a finger at him, then turned the finger-gun on himself, and used the other hand to pantomime a struggle for control of the pseudo-weapon.

Harry shot him a weary look. "Take my word for it—they'd never use it against me, trust me."

"Well, no more staying late. And from now on, you're leaving at six when the shop closes, when I leave," Luna said firmly. "No more staying to watch the telly and play on the computer. Not until this loon business is over," she said soberly.

Harry and Pockets shared a delighted smile.

ooOOoo

Pockets had left to return to the clown school, as it was Tuesday, but he'd promised to return for closing, in spite of Harry's declaration that he and Luna could handle his earlier departure time on their own.

"Funny thing, though…" Harry said to Luna, joining her from the back of the shop where he'd been resting. "I wasn't sure about getting the incantation off…so I just did Priori…"

"You did?" Luna blinked at him twice.

"Yeah, and I didn't cast the Shield Charm. So the question is…what happened? What was it that made me fall? It was almost like…a Protego, but it couldn't have been."

"And what made them leave?" Luna asked the question that'd been on Harry's mind, ever since he'd cast Priori Incantatem.

"Something scared them off, that's for sure," Harry said grimly. "I'm wondering if Severus…." He shrugged. "He's coming by a week from Saturday with Teddy. I'll talk to him then."

ooOOoo

The following Monday, Harry sat in the middle of the Magic Corner, happily watching the mayhem around him. Pockets had warmed up his audience with a round of face painting, then had produced, one by one, musical instruments for each child to play as they paraded in a circle around the Corner. There were maracas, kazoos, sand blocks and clown horns; some shook tambourines, others played harmonicas. But best of all was the sight of Callie, marching proudly in the midst of the little band of merry troubadours, striking her little silver triangle in time to the made-up tune. Pockets led the way of course, banging on a little drum, knees lifted high as he pranced and twirled around the circle.

"I'm taking you both out to supper, my treat," Harry told Luna and Pockets when the children had gone. "To celebrate…our success." He waved toward the Corner.

"Oh Harry, I'm sorry, I'm off to the Burrow with Fred tonight," Luna said, the disappointment clear in her eyes.

Pockets seemed deflated too, so Harry was inspired to do what he did next. Wrapping an arm round the clown's shoulders, Harry smiled brightly. "That's all right. Pockets and I'll go anyway." He looked sideways

at the clown. "Are you in?" he asked.

The clown appeared shocked, then when Luna nodded at him, he gestured down at his clown suit, lastly wiggling his feet, then looked up in question at Harry.

"I don't care what you wear," Harry told him with a smile. "I'll be proud to sit beside you; anyone has a problem with that, well then, fuck 'em."

As they headed down the street for the restaurant, Harry had second thoughts, and voiced them. "Listen. Just don't use the horn, or…" He turned his head to fix Pockets with a meaningful glare. "…god forbid, confetti. Clear?"

Pockets reached out and squeezed his hand and tried to tug him along, but Harry resisted, adding his last condition, "And no skipping!"

ooOOoo

Harry stared at the clown. "Why? Why would you leave? I thought you loved coming here. What's changed your mind?" he asked perplexedly.

Pockets pulled off his skullcap to show a full head of black hair. Reaching up and removing his nose, it was suddenly clear to Harry.

He had to struggle to get the word out. "Severus?"

"You need to find a wizard, Harry. Time's running out," the Minister told him, almost sadly.

"What? What do you mean?"

Turning to leave, Snape just shook his head.

The pounding on the door made Harry's eyes fly open. He glanced at the clock at the bedside, then rubbed his eyes, still disoriented and disturbed by his dream. Snape as the clown…now that definitely qualifies as creepy.

The sound at the door made him leap from the bed and pull on a tee shirt. It was three a.m. Wednesday, and visitors at this time of night couldn't be a good thing. Grabbing his wand, he crept stealthily for the door, then looked through the peephole viewer. He relaxed marginally when he spied two uniformed policemen standing there.

"What do you want?"

"Mr. Potter? Mr. Harry Potter, owner of Party Props on Lassiter Street?"

Harry's heart thudded in his chest, and in a split second, he knew. He didn't yet know how or what, but still, he knew. Remembering his recent lack of vigilance, he swallowed once and called through the door, "May I see some identification, please?"

After examining the cards they held up, Harry closed his eyes for a brief moment, then resolutely opened the door. "I'm Harry Potter," he told them, looking at their somber faces. "What's happened?"

"There's a fire, Mr. Potter. We need you to get dressed and come with us, sir."

ooOOoo

Harry sat on the kerb with his head between his knees as Luna draped an arm around his shoulders. The smell of burning creosote stung the inside of his nose and made his eyes water. Looking up blearily, he sadly looked at the incredible sight from the street corner where the crowd had been cordoned off.

When they'd first arrived, there had been flames along the top front of the row of shops. Then the shop fronts themselves had been consumed in a blaze that had the firemen retreating to the other side of the street as they wrestled their hoses. Harry'd watched, stunned, as the roof of his shop and then those of the four others had fallen in with a groan of twisting steel and crackling hot timber. He'd been only vaguely aware when Luna had arrived. Having nothing to tell her, the two had sat mutely for the past hour as they watched their livelihood go up in smoke.

Leaning her head on his shoulder, Luna finally spoke. "Oh, Harry, it's so awful."

Harry forced himself to consider the damage. Party Props was completely gone, its sagging shop front broken at the crossbeam, the space where the windows had been, grinning at him with a gaping maw. The fire was almost completely contained now, with only flickers of flames still lighting up the far end of the row. Fire hoses crisscrossed the puddled street as the fire brigade concentrated on the last of the fire.

"I should've stayed. I should've known they'd do something like this," he muttered.

Luna sat up and turned to him. "And ended up dead? Don't be stupid, Harry. It's just a shop—well, it wasn't just a shop, I know. But it's replaceable. You're not," she said as she hugged him fiercely.

"Mr. Potter?" Harry looked up to see a man in fireman's clothing, standing in front of them.

Harry struggled to his feet. "Yes?"

After glancing over his shoulder at the scene of destruction, the man turned back. "Your sprinkler system alarm alerted us. By the time we got here, though, the whole row had caught. Did you keep any

chemicals in there? Solvents, paint thinners?" the man asked.

Shaking his head, Harry told him, "No, nothing like that. Only thing out of the ordinary would've been the helium canister. Could that...?"

The fireman shook his head. "No, but…" He pointed to a huddle of people seated on the kerb. "A few of the other owners said you'd recently had some trouble here."

"Yeah, we did. Group of developers who wanted us to sell." His face hardened. "All but two of us agreed," he added bitterly.

The man eyed him, then hesitantly offered, "Nothing official, you hear? But we think some sort of accelerant was used. The forensic team will go in, once it's cooled down. We'd like you to come down in the morning and make a statement, answer some questions if you're willing."

"Oh, I'm willing all right," Harry murmured, suddenly filled with outrage, now that the shock was wearing off.

"Right, then. In the meantime, I'm sorry, but you won't be able to get back in there. Nothing's salvageable, and the structure's unsafe. You'll need to notify your insurer's in the morning as well. They'll want to come out and take a look first thing."

Harry thanked the man and shook his hand. Luna tugged at his arm.

"Come on. I'm taking you home with me. We'll call Fred to come—he'd want to know."

"Hold on," he said, putting his hand out to stop her.

Arms hanging to his sides, Harry ran his eyes over what had mostly been his home for the past five years.

Wasn't it strange, he thought, a place filled with paper and balloons, costumes and toys, a place where he'd worked and planned, a place where he'd made so many memories, most of them good ones. Faces of children and the sounds of laughter, visions of small successes and a few minor setbacks, the Magic Corner, the clown…all of it gone in the space of an hour.

For not the first time in his life, Harry was struck with how fleeting and fragile everything was. Oh, he was grateful that no one had been hurt, but he had no idea what to do with this new sense of loss, this fury that something so valuable could be taken from him against his will, when he'd done nothing…absolutely nothing but work hard and look forward to their future.

He turned and nodded soberly at Luna. "Let's get out of here."

ooOOoo

Harry was grateful for Fred's presence the next day; the three of them made the obligatory rounds together: first the fire marshal, then on to the police station, ending with a meet-up at the…what was left of the shop at eleven with the insurer, who clucked sympathetically as he surveyed the damage from outside the bright orange barricades that had been set up.

"Well, financially, it's a total loss, of course, but you're well-insured; no problems with the pay-out, once the arson report's been filed," the man told him.

"It's only money," Harry muttered as he gawked at the mind-numbing wreckage in front of them.

The man's eyes softened. "That's true. But at least you'll have it to start up again."

"Yeah, I suppose. Some things aren't so easily rebuilt, though."

When they were finished at nearly one, Harry begged off from lunch. "Really, the two of you go ahead. I'm knackered, and I have to…see someone before I collapse."

Luna's eyes widened. "Pockets. Harry, you go home. Fred and I can go—"

Harry couldn't explain why, but he wanted to go on his own. "No, really, I'd like to do this by myself. I know that sounds strange, but…he's never met Fred, and I…oh hell, I don't know why. I'll just tell him and then I'm heading home. Humor me," he said irritably, then immediately regretted it. "Luna, you should get some sleep too. We've been up since three."

Luna's eyes filled as she wrapped Harry in a hug. "Tell Pockets I said hullo." She pulled away. "And Harry, I know you're upset—I am too. But we'll figure this out, I promise you. Back at my place for supper?"

Harry shook his head. "Let's make it breakfast at Kimley's. Don't want to get up for supper."

"Kimley's at nine, then? I'll be there," she promised, and after another hug, and a squeeze to the shoulder from Fred, Harry watched as they headed for the underground.

ooOOoo

Standing uncertainly just inside the arena, Harry looked at the group of clowns gathered at the far side. He was considering his approach, when he saw Pockets talking animatedly with his hands. Their eyes connected across the space and the clown stopped, mid-conversation, dropping his arms. When Harry lifted his hand, Pockets slowly started toward him.

He must've read something in Harry's face, because there was no jubilant greeting, no gesture of 'what're you doing here?' just a slight tilt of his head as he studied Harry, a question in his eyes.

"Sorry to interrupt you…but I didn't want you to just show up this afternoon," Harry explained, then blurted out, "The shop's gone…there was a fire during the night."

Pockets' mouth dropped slowly open, and for a moment he stood without moving, then after raising a finger for Harry to wait, he turned and trotted back to the group in the corner. Harry watched and realized that Pockets was actually talking, when the group of clowns turned to look at him curiously.

The clown disappeared for a moment into a room off the side, then returned, carrying a backpack slung over his shoulder. When he reached Harry, he stopped and considered him for a moment, then murmured, "You look like you could use a drink."

Out on the pavement in the sun, they walked shoulder to shoulder, Harry following where the clown led. "You talked to me," he said in disbelief.

Pockets let out an, "Un-huh," and motioned him around the corner. They took off at a brisk pace. Harry didn't pay much attention to where they were going, but they walked for ten minutes, before the clown pulled at Harry's sleeve and pointed to a three-story building of flats. They went up in the lift, not speaking, then down a hallway to a door at the end of it.

Once inside, Pockets motioned Harry to a chair in the small sitting room, then headed for the kitchen, returning with two bottles of cold beer. Harry took one gratefully, then watched as the clown sat opposite him.

"What happened?" Pockets asked him, and for a moment Harry didn't answer, fascinated by the clown reaching down to pull off his bright yellow shoes. When the clown looked up at him again, Harry began to tell him.

"Started around three…police came to get me…"

The clown had his shoes and socks off, and was wiggling his toes in obvious relief as he worked at the high-rufffled collar.

"Called Luna to meet me there…not sure how it started, but…" He paused, watching as Pockets undid the buttons down the front of the suit, then peeled it off, revealing a slim, muscled body clothed in a thin white tee shirt and white boxers.

"Aegis," the clown muttered, as he stepped into the small bathroom, leaving the door open so he could hear Harry.

Harry stared at him, distracted for a moment by the sound of the man's voice. "Yeah, that's what we think. The marshal said they found traces of a high-powered accelerant."

Pockets was smearing his face with a white cream…over his eyebrows, onto his ears, and down his neck. Harry was mesmerized, as he realized he was about to meet the man underneath the suit…finally. When the clown met his eyes in the mirror, Harry realized he'd stopped his story.

"The whole row is gone. All five, so I guess they win in the end," he said humorlessly.

The clown shook his head, then turned on the tap and leant down to rinse off the cream. He reached for a towel and used it to take off the rest of his makeup, preventing Harry from seeing his face.

Then, as he turned back to the room and Harry, he reached up with a hand, and in a fluid gesture pulled off the black skullcap. A cascade of silvery blond hair fell to his shoulders as he shook it out. His face…his features…the set of his mouth…and his eyes, of course, were already apologetic as he took in the look on Harry's face.

"Well, I guess I've just let the kneazle out of the bag," he murmured as he walked back into the room and took the seat opposite Harry again. Leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, he suddenly seemed worried. "Harry?" he asked.

Harry's mouth didn't seem to want to work, but he finally managed an almost-whisper. "Draco Malfoy. You…you…I can't believe…you, Pockets…" He shook his head and took a shaky breath. "All this

time…" Harry was beyond amazed, astonished, or shocked: he was flummoxed.

"I'm really sorry…. You've already had enough of a shock today." Draco rubbed his hands through his hair in frustration. "I considered not doing it, while we were walking, but…" He smiled lopsidedly. "I knew this was going to be far beyond Pockets' ability to…be of any use to you."

Harry's mind was racing. So, this was…Draco Malfoy?

A shock, yes, but the most bothersome thing was the notion that Draco had known…he had to have known.

"You knew," he accused softly, "when we made the agreement."

Draco sat up in his chair, looking insulted. "I have eyes. Of course I knew it was you. What I didn't know, when the office asked me to meet with the party shop owner, was that it would be you. I'd briefly met with Luna, of course, but she'd only told me that there was a children's group that needed a clown three times a week. I didn't put it together until the two of you showed up."

Harry considered this for a moment. "But once you knew…."

"Didn't matter," Draco said soberly. "And I don't regret it," he said with a hint of defiance in his voice. His face seemed to soften as he took in the expression on Harry's face. "You…never suspected?" he asked curiously.

Harry shook his head, then rested it in the palm of his hand. "No."

"I…I was planning on telling you…soon," Draco confessed. "I thought we might've got to that point…where it wouldn't matter. What I do at the clown school, instructing, well, it's fine for a living, and I like what I do there, but what I do in your shop…" He smiled at Harry. "That's a clown's bread and

butter. I'm just…sorry I had to tell you under these circumstances."

Harry waved his hand. "Like you said, it doesn't matter. Especially not now."

Draco seemed slightly alarmed by the resignation in Harry's voice. "Tell me again what happened. What does the fire marshal plan to do? Do they have evidence? When will you know?"

Harry talked then, filling Draco in on all he'd learnt from the marshal, and the police, and the insurer's. He told him that Julian had decided not to rebuild but would sell, and that meant that Harry was as good as dead in the water. With Aegis already owning all but the Party Props land, how could he rebuild with a ruin around him? They'd just wait him out, was his guess.

Watching Draco's face, though, Harry had to fight the wild urge to pinch himself to make certain he wasn't dreaming. Pockets was Draco…or should he say Draco was Pockets? Oh hell, his clown, his gentle, sensitive, funny, great-with-children clown, was—it boggled his mind—Draco Malfoy.

Draco Malfoy, whom he'd not seen since Lucius Malfoy's trial, when Harry'd had to testify to the events that occurred in March of 1998 at Malfoy Manor. Draco'd seemed like a specter then, pale and thin and solemn beside his mother in the very front row, his face fixed as he listened to the damning evidence.

This was clearly the same person…but so very different, not only in appearance—understandable, since almost ten years had passed—but there was a remarkable absence of resentment, of arrogance, that Harry'd always thought was part and parcel of the Slytherin pain in the arse. And on top of it all—the most difficult to assimilate, in fact—was that this man and Pockets were one and the same.

"Harry?" The sound of his name pulled Harry back to himself.

"Hmm, so that's it. Nothing I can do but wait," he said as he tried to keep from staring at his…Draco.

Draco got up and went to retrieve two more bottles of beer, then handed one to Harry as he sat.

"Luna…I'm glad she insisted you not sleep in the shop anymore."

Harry had to agree this time. "Yeah, good thing, that, although I wonder…" He didn't finish. "She said to tell you hullo."

The gray eyes sparkled. "I love Luna—she had it right, you know. She was a loon at Hogwarts, but I see her differently now." He laughed softly. "The day she walked in with that bloody Gryffindor hat on…"

Harry didn't know why he suddenly knew right then, but he did. Perhaps it was the affection in Draco's voice; more likely, it was the slightly guilty look on his face. Oh well, how could he've known? Luna loved everyone…mostly, and Pockets had been a clown, for crying out loud.

"Luna knew it was you, didn't she?" he asked, not really a question.

Draco nodded. "Cornered me the second week. Told me not to let you know, though, because…how did she put it? Because you had a 'clown' thing, and it would take a while to convince you. Me, well, I thought it'd mostly be a 'Draco Malfoy' thing, and you'd never be convinced." He smiled uncertainly.

"You were safe long ago, on both accounts," Harry told him wearily. "Nothing of what I said to Pockets would change; you've pulled your weight. The children love you, and there was a time or two when you came in handy. With the loons," he smiled slightly.

Looking to the side, Draco didn't seem to want to meet his eyes. "Well, it was the least I could do. Someone should've been watching your back," he said uncomfortably, staring at the label on his beer bottle.

It took him a moment longer to figure it out, but then Harry sat up suddenly. "It was you!" When Draco winced, he added, "You were following me, weren't you?"

Draco made a face. "It's different with Muggles. I saw you trying to be diplomatic, and I knew that wasn't

going to stop those two."

Harry struggled to form a reply, and could only come up with, "Why? Why would you even care?"

His eyes narrowed, Draco said, "Are you seriously that stupid? You saved my arse once, remember? And besides, when I'm in character…well, let's just say Pockets had reason to be fond of you and Luna, not to mention my twenty-five pounds per week. Seeing you in your shop, how you were with the kids…it was easy to forget about the person you were before."

"Still the same person here, Draco."

Draco tilted his head. "If you like to think that, then all right. But I don't think so."

Harry was suddenly weary of it all—this day, this conversation, all of it. It must've shown, because Draco abruptly changed the subject.

"I'm really very sorry about your shop. You should take some time to regroup…before you make any decisions."

Standing unsteadily to his feet, Harry nodded. "That's what Luna and Fred told me." He set his empty bottle down, then headed for the door, with Draco just behind him. "Thanks for the beer, and for…" He shook his head, then rested it against the edge of the open door.

"You can get home all right?" Draco asked him.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." He was about to step out, when he turned back. "Listen, Luna and I are meeting at Kimley's for breakfast at nine…if you want to come. It's a strategy meeting, I'd wager. You're part of the team, so if you'd like…"

Draco seemed taken aback for a moment, then quickly recovered, his gray eyes warm. "I'd like."

Harry pursed his lips, thinking he should say something else, but then pivoted out into the hallway. With a wave of his hand, he murmured, "See you then." He felt Draco watching him as he trudged toward the lift.

ooOOoo

There was bound to be awkwardness, Harry realized, as he eyed Draco over his cup of tea at Kimley's on Thursday morning. He'd planned on having a little talk with Luna when he arrived, but had to swallow it when he saw that Draco was already there, the two of them with their heads together, laughing, as he made his way to the table.

"So," Luna began, after they'd placed their order, "we have fourteen parties booked from now until the end of August, not including the hospital visit in July."

Harry blinked. "Oh. Right, I'd forgotten." He truly had; their remaining engagements had been the last thing on his mind. "Well, we'll have to cancel, I suppose."

"Cancel?" Luna frowned. "Harry, why in the world would we do that? They're counting on us to—"

Harry cut her off. "Because we have no way of delivering. I think they'll understand," he muttered, glancing up to see Draco shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"Of course we can deliver! I've already talked to Fertey's, and they've agreed to supply us at cost. Really, we don't need much, and the three of us are the most important part of the parties. Isn't that right, Pockets?"

Draco looked solemnly at Harry. "I'm still in, if the two of you are."

Looking from one to the other, Harry sighed heavily. "Well, we did make a commitment. And…" he paused as he watched Luna's face light up, which decided him. "…it's not like we have anything else to do."

"Until the shop's rebuilt," Luna added, watching Harry hopefully.

"Haven't decided that yet," Harry murmured. "All right, so we'll carry on over the summer with these, but don't book any more," he said pointedly to Luna. Nodding at Draco, he said, "I'll pay you, of course."

Shaking his head, Draco stipulated, "Only the party rate. And nothing for the hospital. Luna and I've already worked this out."

"Oh you have, have you?" Harry shot Luna a mock-withering look.

The server arrived with their breakfasts, and for a moment the conversation stalled. Then when Harry caught Luna nudging Draco, he smiled wryly, "The two of you had this all decided, didn't you?"

"Yes," Luna said simply with a smile. "I contacted everyone yesterday afternoon, and assured them we'd be going forward with the parties. I knew you'd agree," she added confidently.

As they ate, it was mostly Luna and Draco who talked, Harry occasionally mumbling when spoken to. He was still in shock, he defended himself inwardly, not only because of the fire, but because he was sitting here, eating breakfast with the last person on earth he ever would've imagined. It was funny, and ludicrous, and a bit outrageous, all rolled into one.

Harry watched the man out of the corner of his eye as they ate, scrutinizing the way his mouth worked—how it lifted at the corners when he was amused, how it drew down to the corners when he frowned, how the skin crinkled at his eyes as the muscles in his face worked, how he raised that talented

set of eyebrows to express himself…

It was then that he finally had to accept that Draco truly was his clown. There was no mistaking it, he had to admit, watching the set of Draco's shoulders when he shrugged, the way he gestured with his hands, even the timing of how he reacted to Luna's ever-present hilarity. He supposed he had an excuse for not putting it together before, but there was no denying it now. He'd been duped by the clown…Draco…Pockets, whatever.

He was suddenly brought up short by the silence at the table, and looked up to see both Luna and Draco staring at him expectantly. "What? Did I miss something?"

"Where did you go just then?" Luna asked gently, her eyes full of compassion and worry.

Smiling crookedly, Harry answered, "Nowhere important. Just contemplating my life."

ooOOoo

Luna was the first to leave, and for a while after, Harry and Draco filled in a few of the most obvious blanks: the friends from Hogwarts they both still kept in touch with, Draco's teaching schedule at the clown school, Harry's meetings with the Minister in Victoria Park, then a brief silence before Harry moved on to more personal things.

"I was sorry to hear about your mother," he said quietly.

Draco didn't look up, toying with a salt shaker. "Thanks."

"So…you still have the Manor?" Harry asked.

"No, we sold that before she died, actually. Too many bad things…." He shrugged, then looked up at Harry. "My father wasn't happy about it, but seeing as how he's in for life, I didn't care what he thought."

Harry struggled with what to say. "Do you see him at all?"

"Once a month, usually. I…it's what a son should do, I figure." He looked up at Harry, his gray eyes dull. "Terrible place, Azkaban is, even without Dementors. I'm surprised he's lasted this long."

Shuddering, Harry replied, "Can't imagine. I was surprised at the time. That he got a life sentence."

Draco snorted, then smiled humorlessly, an expression that Harry suddenly recognized. "I wasn't. I was surprised he didn't get Kissed. So was he. My mother was the only one who was shocked." He shook his head. "Anyway, he and I…we've sort of made our peace with each other. Nothing else left to do."

Harry was silent, watching the sadness and suffering in Draco's eyes, which hardened slightly when Harry was caught at it.

"Don't feel sorry for me, Potter." He drained his cup, then placed his napkin on the table. "Have a class at noon, so I'd best be off. So…" He stood and looked down at Harry, then stuck out his hand. "We have a deal on the parties, then?"

Reaching out to shake his hand, Harry nodded. "Deal. And thanks…for yesterday. Took me a while to process it all, but it's slowly sinking in. The shop…" He couldn't help but stare at Draco one last time. "…and you."

Draco seemed to understand, nodding as he pushed his chair in. Then he paused to say, "I'm so used to spending Friday afternoons at Party Props. So…how about I bring us takeaway tomorrow night?"

Harry opened his mouth, then suddenly closed it. Well, why the bloody hell not? What else do I have to do? And besides, there're still things I want to know… "My place? Do you know…" He closed his mouth abruptly, then shook his head. "Of course you know, seeing how you followed me," he said mockingly.

"Yeah, I do know where you live," Draco told him, seeming entirely unrepentant. "So, we're on? Say seven?" he asked as he turned to go.

Hesitating, Harry nodded. "Be ready to tell me how you ended up…you know, in the clown thing," he told him emphatically.

Draco nodded, unsmiling. "All right, since you asked for it. See you then."

Harry watched as he threaded his way among the tables, then tracked his progress down the pavement, until he was entirely out of sight.

ooOOoo

He had a restless night; after hours of trying to drift off to sleep, when he finally did, his dreams were the stuff of nightmares…Harry sadly surveying the wreckage of the shop after Luna pulled an Erumpent horn from the magician's hat…Severus lying bloody and cold and dead in the Shrieking Shack…the sound of his mother screaming…Pockets leering at him grotesquely, just before he burst into flames.

He was up and down all night, then finally gave up at nearly five a.m., when he made himself a cup of tea and sat by the window to watch the city come to life. He was weary in mind, exhausted in body, his temper simmering just below the surface. Of the long list of things he'd suffered in his relatively short life, he decided that the loss of his shop was by far the most personal violation of all.

ooOOoo

"Yikes, this is hot," Harry said, his eyes beginning to water.

"Hmm, yeah, Gai Pad Grapao. It's the chilies." Draco pushed a fizzy drink across the table toward Harry.

After gulping down half of it, Harry pushed the carton away. "So, I just have to say this…and get it out there."

Draco sat back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head as he raised an eyebrow. "So, say it.'

Harry stared at him. "That eyebrow thing—how long did it take you to learn it?"

Laughing, Draco asked, "That's it?"

Harry made a face. "No, that's not it. You distracted me with the…eyebrow."

Draco shrugged. "Every clown builds his own repertoire of facial expressions," he stated, amused. "That's one I practiced for quite a while. Got it from Severus, actually."

"Oh yeah, he's the eyebrow master," Harry said ruefully, then picked up another carton and sniffed it carefully before he dug in. "No, what I wanted to say was…" He took a bite and chewed thoughtfully, then his eyes drifted to Draco's face. "We haven't said two words to each other in ten years; then you spend hours in my shop. Granted, I didn't know it was you, but I swallowed my anti-clown…prejudice, and got…sort of attached to you. And now…here we are. You have to admit it's a bit weird," he finished self-consciously.

Smiling slowly, Draco brought his hands down to pick up his drink. "You got attached to me, huh?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not to you, to the clown, idiot."

Draco tilted his head to the side. "I am the clown."

"You know what I mean," Harry said quietly. "Just a bit of a shock…takes some getting used to."

Shrugging, Draco admitted, "I imagine so. I've had plenty of time to get used to you, though."

After wiping his mouth with his napkin, Harry waved at Draco. "So, the clown act. How did that happen?"

Draco stood and gestured toward the sitting room. "You done? This'll take a while."

They sat on either end of the settee, angled toward each another. "Started with my mother, actually. Do you…know what happened to her? I mean, did Severus tell you? He knew."

Harry shook his head. "Only that she was sick for a long time, no details, though."

Eyes seeming far away, Draco began, "She didn't do well after Father's trial. Kept hoping his sentence would be commuted, or at least reduced. Wasn't until the final appeal was rejected that she saw the handwriting on the wall."

"That would've been three years afterward," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, about that. At that point, we were still at the Manor. I convinced her we should sell then, too many memories in that place. So we got a smaller house in Devon."

"You still have it?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I do. Don't spend much time there, though," he said. "She never liked it there. Wouldn't go out, then wouldn't get out of bed. I think at that point I knew she was in serious trouble. Took her to Andromeda's for a while, but they didn't get on, mostly because Mother was a bitch about everything—accused Aunt Andie of abandoning us when it counted. They fought a great deal. So back to Devon we went."

Draco sighed and got up and went to Harry's fridge for another fizzy drink. Without asking, he brought one for Harry and handed it to him, then retook his seat.

"To make a long story short, she just…fell apart. Wouldn't eat, didn't sleep; I'd find her wandering the house in the middle of the night, not making sense, like she didn't know where she was. Ended up in St. Mungo's for a while; they couldn't do much either. Tried to force her to eat, to get up every day and talk to the Healers."

"She missed your father," Harry said gently, remembering the proud woman at the trial.

"Yeah, that was it. Along with knowing he was never coming home. She begged me to let her die in peace, get her out of St. Mungo's. So it was back to Aunt Andie's. By then she was too weak to get out of bed. Still not eating. But at least she was with family."

"I didn't know she was even there. I sort of got out of touch with everyone for a while," Harry murmured.

"Aunt Andie was really good to her. But I was in London one weekend, when she called me to come to the house." He swallowed, his face wan. "Aunt Andie found her that morning when she took in her tea. She must've died sometime in the night. I felt horrible for not being there. And I suspect…that she might've taken something. But we never found any evidence of that."

"I'm so sorry," Harry said as he shook his head, wishing there was something else he could say.

Draco nodded stiffly. "Anyway, all of that was to tell you how I started on the clown trip. When she was in St. Mungo's, I was there almost every day. In the afternoons, I'd go out to the Muggle park down the way, sit in the sun, sort of trying to keep my sanity," he said wryly. "And there was this troupe of clowns—three of them, actually, who were there during the week. They performed for the children, roamed around doing bits of spontaneous gags. One of them befriended me—told me later he could tell I was very sad and needed a laugh." He smiled as he remembered. "Unlike Pockets, he was a talking clown, so we…talked, over a period of weeks. And…that's how it started. Ended up taking me to see the clown school. I watched him for a week, then signed up for their amateur class."

"Ah. So that's how it started, then, wanting to be a clown?" Harry asked.

Snorting aloud, startling Harry, Draco scoffed, "No, I didn't want to be a clown; I wanted to fuck the clown."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "You what?" he asked with a snort of his own.

"Sorry to disillusion you. I was attracted to the clown, and yes, I wanted to fuck him, is why I went." He propped his feet up on the table in front of the settee, then glanced at Harry. "And I did for a while. Didn't last—it never does, but we're still friends."

"But…you're a clown," Harry felt compelled to point out stupidly.

"All right, Harry. Here's the rest of it—what you've been waiting to hear, probably." Resting his head on the back of the settee, he rolled it to the side to look at Harry, his eyes suddenly serious. "I stayed and finished the amateur class—eight weeks' worth, since I didn't have anything better to do. At the end of it, we gave a little performance—you know we have a grandstand there? They brought in a group of children for it, and the…strangest thing happened to me. Something I'd never expected, because up to that point we'd never had an audience. Anyway, two of us were doing a gag, and there was this little girl in the very front—sort of reminds me of Callie, now that I think of it—she was all wide-eyed and just…mesmerized by the whole affair."

Draco ducked his head for a moment, then looked up at Harry. "Don't know if you'll understand this, but here goes. I was watching her face…and I saw it happen."

Harry's own eyes were wide. "Saw it happen?"

"The funny. She laughed at me." He shook his head with a smile. "All those years of provoking reactions from people, and this was the first time I did something…at no one's expense but my own. I made her laugh—I made her happy, and it was the most…intoxicating feeling. Powerful, but in a good way—something I'd never felt before. And…" He shot Harry a slightly worried look. "And that's when I knew."

Studying the man for a moment, Harry finally spoke. "And you're so good at it. Being vulnerable…connecting to people."

Draco's eyes grew large. "So, you do understand," he murmured. "That's it exactly. Not where I'd ever seen myself ending up."

"Who would've ever thought you'd be so much better at that than me…connecting to people," Harry said almost mournfully.

Laughing softly, Draco disagreed. "You do it too—connect with people. Look how the kids love you."

"Hmmm, yeah, they're the only ones," Harry lamented.

"I doubt that," Draco said, eyeing him speculatively. "You know… I felt the same way with you as I did with that little girl."

"With me?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"Yeah, the first time I made you laugh. What an odd experience…after all the things we did to each other over the years, that was the most satisfying."

Harry pursed his lips. "You really are a clown, you know that?"

"So I am," Draco said serenely.

The evening grew older, as they sat and talked for several hours. Harry was now comfortably slumped on his end of the settee. Draco was droning on, talking about clown makeup and wardrobes, and since they'd moved to whiskey long ago, Harry was pleasantly buzzed, idly thinking to himself that maybe tonight he'd be able to sleep without nightmares.

He didn't know how long he'd had his eyes closed, but was vaguely aware of the dip in the settee as Draco got up. He couldn't have cared less when he heard water running in the kitchen and the sounds of washing up.

Just on the verge of sleep, he felt his shoes being pulled off, and the soft touch of a sheet being tucked in around his shoulders. The last thing his consciousness registered was the quiet snick of the door being carefully closed.

ooOOoo

Harry awoke to the sound of pounding at his door. Sitting up suddenly, he was filled with an eerie and disturbing sense of dé jà vu. Looking through the peephole, though, he remembered his missed appointment. "Oh, shit!"

"Good. You're alive," Severus said, deadpan, when Harry swung open the door.

"Where's Teddy?" Harry asked, as Severus followed him into the sitting room.

"I took him home as soon as we saw the shop, then came directly here. I wanted him out of the way until I found you…or what was left of you," he said dryly. "So, tell me everything."

Harry told him all of it, from start to finish, leaving out one particular detail.

"The bloody development bastards," Severus said darkly at the end of it, clearly enraged. "Well, it's a good thing you weren't sleeping in the shop. Who knows what might've happened? Not that I doubt your ability to protect yourself," he added, watching Harry's face. "It appears your instincts were correct, however. You were being followed."

Harry relished what he was about to say. "Yeah, I was, but not by those lunatics." He paused when Severus raised an eyebrow, then delivered his shocking discovery. "It was Draco Malfoy," he said intently, gratified when Severus' mouth dropped slightly open.

"Draco?" he repeated. "Why would Draco be following you?" he asked, perplexed, setting his tea to the side in concern.

"Because…he's the clown, Severus."

"The clown?"

"My clown. Pockets." When Severus still looked at him as if he were speaking another language, Harry told him patiently, "The one who's been working in the shop for the past two months."

"Ah. That clown," Severus said slowly. "How odd," he said with a shrug, then picked up his cup again.

Harry eyed him suspiciously. "You don't seem surprised…that he's a clown. Why is that?"

"I knew about his…clowning. Have known for years," Severus told him blandly.

"You knew? You never said a word!" Harry protested.

Severus gave him a look of disgust. "Why would I? I had no idea he was your particular clown, of course, but I'd never divulge details of his life to you, just as I'd never let on to him about yours."

Harry had to reluctantly agree that this made a sort of sense, but still… "Well, he had to come clean after the fire. A right shock, that was," he complained. The thought suddenly occurred to him. "You didn't put him up to following me, then?"

"Certainly not. If you'll recall, I offered an Auror, not that it would've helped, seeing what they did."

Harry told him how Luna and Draco had presented a united front, and convinced him to at least keep his commitments of the summer. He ended by casually mentioning that Draco had been there the night before, that he'd heard the story of why Draco had become a clown, and then awkwardly admitted that the air between them seemed to have been cleared, for the most part.

"I'm a bit surprised," Harry admitted. "He's changed, Severus."

"I know, but he's not the only one."

When Severus stood to leave, he asked Harry, "What about your shop? You're going to rebuild, I take it?"

Shrugging, Harry said, "It's a bit early for that. I'm still getting used to…everything."

Severus eyed him almost disapprovingly, then said, "You remember the first rule of dueling, when you're disarmed?"

Harry sighed. "Rearm yourself as quickly as you can. I know. I just…need some time to think first."

"You've faced greater obstacles than this," Severus reminded him dourly. "You have friends who're willing to help you, money to begin again; so take the time you need, then get on with it."

Smiling, Harry saluted. "Yes, sir."

ooOOoo

On Monday, Harry sat down and made himself a schedule of what to do with his free time. He had books he'd been meaning to read, magazines piled high in a corner, and letters to write. In the evenings, someone always showed up to drag him out to supper; he'd been to Ron and Hermione's once, and Fred and Luna's twice. Draco had put in an appearance several times, but still…Harry felt set adrift in a life where he no longer had days at the shop and evenings with his telly and computer.

By Thursday, he'd called and arranged for the hook-up, then set out to purchase a new computer, and small portable telly, on impulse. It was a start, he figured, although he still felt no desire to make definite plans.

On Saturday afternoon, the three of them did the first party since the shop had burnt down. Luna's arrangements with Fertey's for supplies went off without a hitch, and Harry found himself enjoying the distraction immensely. The three of them worked so well together, he realized, even without all the props they usually had on hand.

They were packing up at the end of the party, when Harry noticed Luna and Draco whispering to each

other, eyeing him as they worked. Suddenly, he was filled with warmth, knowing that he really did have the best friends in the world.

After they'd left and were walking down the pavement, Harry said casually, "Look, I know what the two of you are up to, and it really isn't necessary. I'm a big boy; you don't have to entertain me every evening."

"We know that, Harry," Luna said at his side. "It's just…we don't think it's good for you to spend all of your time alone."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm hardly alone. I see both of you almost every day. I'm just saying you don't have to feel like you—"

"Yeah, we know, entertain you. We're not. Remember, we don't have the shop to go to either, so button it up," Draco muttered at his other side. "I've got classes in the morning, but then my days are free."

"My entire days are free," Luna murmured. "Wizarding Wheezes closes at seven, so I don't usually see Fred during the week anyway. We're not babysitting you, Harry. We're just all trying to muddle through."

Harry wasn't convinced. "Yeah, well, I appreciate it, but we can't go on like this all summer."

They were at Luna's underground stop, so she turned and said, "Whatever you say, Harry." Nodding at Draco, she said, "Supper at my place tomorrow night?"

"We'll be there," Draco told her with a smile.

"You two are unbelievable," Harry murmured as he watched her go, then turned to Draco resignedly. "So, you drew the short straw for tonight, then?'

"I most certainly did," Draco said. "Come quietly now. I'm cooking."

ooOOoo

"You want to hear something funny?" Harry asked after they'd finished up with supper and set the dishes to wash. "I thought Severus was the one who put you up to following me."

Draco made a face. "You're right—that's funny, but I haven't seen him in almost a year, so no, he didn't."

"Yeah, I know that now, but that's what I thought when I found out he…knew about you."

Seeming slightly uncomfortable, Draco rubbed at his temples. "I was worried…after those two showed up and you threatened to call the police. You know, the time right at closing when you were by yourself. So…I started hanging at the corner, waiting for you to leave. Wasn't a big deal," he muttered softly.

"Well, I appreciate what you did," Harry told him.

"Lot of good it did, though. Should've stayed and watched the shop instead."

"Who knew?" Harry asked rhetorically, then frowned as he thought. "That night when they almost got in…well, I was lucky you were there."

Draco turned on the settee, his eyes earnest. "I'm really sorry about that. I saw them go in, and was just at the door when I heard all the racket. Didn't even think about it—barged in and cast the Protego. Range was too close, though." He smiled slightly. "What a disaster. You on the floor, the two of them trying to get past me. I got them with a Stinging Hex, you'll be happy to know, then I had to decide what to do about you. You were starting to come around, so I propped your head up a bit, then let myself out. But I watched through the window until you were on your feet and went to lock the door. I almost came

in and told you that night. Maybe I should've," he finished thoughtfully.

"Wouldn't have made any difference. We'd've never expected them to do what they did, even after that."

They sat quietly for a moment, then Harry had one more question. "When you followed me, I never saw you. How far did you…go?"

Draco seemed slightly embarrassed. "Just to the end of your street. I watched you from there until you were in the door. Then I left."

Harry stared him for a moment, then had to say it. "It's still really weird…but…thanks."

ooOOoo

The party on Wednesday that next week was winding down. All the children were seated at their tables, eating cake and ice cream as Luna passed out favors and noise-makers. Harry was sitting moodily on the edge of the stairs to the second storey, when Pockets appeared in front of him.

"Good show," Harry told him. "They really liked the origami birds. And the rubber chicken juggling." He snorted, watching as the clown knelt down to face him. "Next time, maybe you could…" he trailed off, perplexed when Pockets put a finger to his lips, signaling for quiet.

First the clown rubbed his stomach, then licked his lips. Reaching into a pocket, he carefully pulled out…something invisible. As he made exaggerated hand motions, Harry realized that Pockets was peeling a banana that wasn't there. He watched, fascinated, as the clown licked his lips again, then tentatively stuck out his tongue, starting at the base of his hand, up…up…up to the tip of the banana, then down slowly, his eyes closed in rapture as he tasted.

Harry held his breath as he watched, while Pockets tongued the entire banana, then slowly plunged it all the way in, top to bottom, until his fist was flush with his face. The clown worked the muscles in his throat, miming sucking motions as he opened his eyes and batted them at Harry.

Looking over Pockets' shoulder to make certain they weren't being observed, Harry leant in close and muttered, "There's a part of my anatomy that finds that truly obscene…and like I told you before, that's one talented mouth. You'll make some lucky man very happy." He smiled then and reached out to tug on one of Pockets' ears.

The clown's mouth was still a round 'O', filled as it was by the banana, until he suddenly bit down, then munched loudly as he devoured the phantom fruit, ending by licking his fingers, one by one, still flirting coyly with his eyes.

Harry laughed out loud then, and clapped twice as Pockets sat back on his heels.

Wiping his mouth, the clown said in a soft voice that no one else could hear, "You really made me work for that one, Potter."

Still smiling, Harry leant in and squeaked the clown's nose. "Yeah, I'm a tough nut to crack, aren't I?"

Pockets didn't smile. "You have something to be sad about, is all. Just wanted you to forget about it for a while."

"Oh, I most certainly did," Harry assured him, and squeaked the nose a second time.

ooOOoo

The next Saturday, Draco went to Victoria Park with Harry this time.

"World-tilting…seeing the two of you together…and not a drop of blood in sight," Severus said wryly.

Harry glanced at Draco. "Oh, well, we're actually getting on fairly well."

Draco taunted, "Harry likes Pockets better than me."

"That's the absolute truth," Harry smiled.

The spent a pleasurable hour, mostly Severus extracting information from Draco, whom he'd not seen in quite some time.

"So, any news on the investigation?" Severus asked as they were about to say their goodbyes.

"Not at all. They know it was arson; they have their suspicions, but I guess proving Aegis did it isn't so easy."

They were quiet for a moment, then Harry noticed that Severus and Draco were staring at one another.

"They shouldn't get away with it," Draco said quietly.

"No doubt," Severus agreed, seeming to search Draco's face. "But my experience in these matters has been that what goes around, comes around." He held his eyes for a moment longer, then turned to Harry. "You're keeping yourself busy, then?

"Yeah, we're averaging two parties a week, the hospital visit's the week after next, and I've been hanging

around the clown school, trying to figure out what makes Draco tick."

Draco guffawed. "He can try all he likes to fathom my clown persona; my mystique is patented and unknowable."

"Mystique my arse," Harry muttered, making the other two men laugh.

Harry had to admit to himself, though, that the more he watched Pockets perform, the more in awe he was of the clown's skill and art: all the more so now that he knew that the man hadn't sprung up from a clowning family, where his mother and father had taught him their craft.

No, in fact, Draco had come from the least funny family imaginable, which Harry had to acknowledge did lend his entire clowning talent a…mystique of its own.

ooOOoo

The two of them sat so close together that their knees almost touched.

"Try not to laugh," Draco told Harry as he smoothed a hand over Harry's cheek. When Harry pressed his lips together, Draco tsked and tapped him on the side of his neck. "That's no better either. You have to keep the muscles in your face relaxed, as much as you can," he said as he turned to the small table beside them to scoop up another dollop of white face paint with his fingers.

Harry sat with his hands resting on his thighs, back straight, his neck slightly craned forward as Draco, just opposite him, took his time to fix Harry's clown face. Working more of the cream into Harry's cheek, then up onto his forehead, Draco told him, "You already know that being a clown, especially in clown face, is all about being vulnerable."

"Yeah, I seem to remember someone telling me that," Harry said through his teeth. He winced as Draco firmly drew on large black eyebrows, then warily watched as he picked up a smaller pot of red face paint.

"You can talk, just don't move your lips," he teased as he began to paint a one-inch oval around Harry's mouth. "Use your body too. Your gestures, your eyes. All those things…are how you get your audience to identify with you. Because…" He sat back and narrowed his eyes as he turned Harry's face to the left and right, then released it. "…human emotion is universal. Think about it: humor, sadness, rage, elation, frustration, fear. No matter what you do, they'll get it—even children. Especially children."

Pushing his chair back, Draco studied Harry's face, then nodded. "Now for the finishing touches." Standing, he rummaged in a box at the back of the table, then turned and sat again. "How about blue hair?" Fitting the skullcap wig on, he then freed the tips of Harry's ears. After a few minor adjustments, the final addition was the red rubber clown nose. When Draco squeaked it, Harry had to struggle not to laugh out loud. One last dusting with powder, a spritz of fixative, and Draco pulled Harry up by his hands and turned him toward the mirror.

As Harry stared, mouth gaping, Draco watched from over his shoulder. Meeting Harry's stunned eyes, Draco murmured, "God, you're already an open book." Patting Harry on the shoulder, Draco told him, "Practice a bit; try on some expressions. I'm going to make myself some tea, and then you're going to entertain me."

Harry continued to stare at his reflection for a moment, then slowly, he experimented with his mouth. Big smiles, small ones, grimaces and growls. He tried raising his eyebrows and managed a very weak imitation of Pockets, but then discovered that he was adept enough at wiggling his nose to produce a fairly silly effect. The eyes were the hardest part to alter, he found, as he tried to inject them with pity and sadness, joy and terror.

"Ah. Yes, the eyes are the hardest," Harry heard from behind him. He turned and saw that Draco had set a straight back chair in the center of the room and parked himself on it. Gesturing with his teacup toward Harry's face, he elaborated, "The eyes, unlike the other parts of the face, will only reflect emotion from within. Strong emotion. Something you have to dredge up from inside of yourself, and magnify ten-fold for the audience to be able see it." He sat back in the chair. "So, Mr. Clown, show me what you feel. Not made-up stuff, you understand. What's in there right now?"

Standing still just in front of him, Harry considered the challenge for a moment: not to act the way he thought a clown should act, but to use clowning license to show what was actually there, inside Harry Potter, on this particular evening in July. But first, he himself had to figure out what that was.

Harry pondered, grateful that Draco continued to sit silently. He realized that being entirely truthful would make him vulnerable, something Harry wasn't exactly comfortable with, especially in front of this particular person.

From out of his clown-painted face, Harry soberly stared at the man in front of him. Just the sight of those eyes…waiting expectantly…reminded Harry that Pockets had taken this very same risk with Harry himself, day after day, asking for nothing in return except …acceptance, yes, but more specifically, validation.

"Harry, show me what you feel," Draco repeated gently.

Opening his mouth to speak, Harry rolled his eyes as remembered he was voiceless. When Draco laughed softly, Harry was inspired to reach up and pull the corners of his lips down. Sliding his hands up to his eyes, he used his thumbs to grotesquely draw down their lower pockets. He saw Draco set his cup on the floor, then sit up straighter.

Almost in slow motion, Harry contorted his face in a grimace, baring his teeth, then widened his mouth in the caricature of a snarl.

"Use your body too," came the quiet words.

Harry didn't even have to think. Face still twisted, he widened the stance of his legs, then raised his fist and shook it at the ceiling.

"Very good. You're angry."

Next up was an invisible miming of battering a punching bag that repeatedly knocked Harry over, only infuriating him further. He kicked several invisible buckets and landed on his arse. Even though Draco laughed, Harry didn't feel funny at all. But the more he kicked and punched and danced….

"Great eyes. You've got the depth right…the rage…the despair…the helplessness."

Harry bent over at the waist, and thrust his hands into the wig and mimed pulling his hair out, his chest shaking with suppressed anger. He pounded his knees with his fists, rocked from side to side, then stood slowly again, his shoulders slumped, as he showcased his exhaustion.

"Yeah, I do understand. Someone should pay," Draco told him as he stood, then pointed Harry toward the chairs by the makeup table.

"Come here," Draco murmured, then reaching up, he surprised Harry by grasping him by the shoulders and pulling him to the edge of his chair. He searched his eyes for a moment, and then shook his head. Taking a wet tissue from the cream container, he gently began to remove the makeup. "Being bitter is just one more way they make you pay."

His voice was calm, and the action soothing. Harry closed his eyes, the emotion suddenly there without him having to work for it.

"Don't let them do that to you. Putting your life back together is the best way of not letting them win," Draco continued as he wiped carefully around Harry's eyes with the cream.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, then sighed. "So…I guess that's what I'll do, then."

Draco tilted his head to the side, biting at his lower lip as he concentrated. But he spared a slight smile for Harry. "I knew you would. You just needed a kick in the arse, is all."

ooOOoo

Harry strolled into Kimley's for lunch, spotted Luna and Draco at their usual table in the back and smiled when Luna waved.

"Hullo, Harry," she greeted him as he slid into his chair, then wasted no time in rotating the folded newspaper to rest in front of him. "Look at this," she directed as she pointed to an article near the bottom.

Harry bent in to read, then sucked in a breath. "Aegis Development Corporation Headquarters Building Destroyed in Mysterious Explosion," he murmured, then read rapidly, mouthing the words as he went. Nearly to the end, he read aloud, "No fire…but inspectors speculate that fumes from large containers of industrial-grade accelerants stored in the basement might have contributed to the explosion." He looked up to see Draco watching him attentively.

Looking down, he finished, "Corporate executives of the mega-development company have been called to account for their possession of the illegal substances, especially in light of the recent destruction of five shops on Lassiter Street in June, where an identical accelerant was used. Three of the affected properties had already been purchased by Aegis, who acquired the fourth after the suspicious fire. Charges of malfeasance were subsequently lodged by several of the property owners, but no solid evidence had yet been discovered to link Aegis to the suspected arson. There were no injuries reported in either of the two incidents."

Silently, Harry folded the paper, then looked up to find Draco studiously buttering his toast. "Draco…" He glanced at Luna, who was stuffing a croissant in her mouth. "Draco, you wouldn't happen to know anything…" Harry stopped and shook his head, when Draco looked up at him questioningly.

"About that?" Draco tapped the newspaper. "Oh, I know one thing, and so do you," he said pointedly. "Severus said it best: what goes around, comes around." He shrugged at the stunned look on Harry's face. "You play with fire, you get burned. Simple as that."

Harry ate his sandwich thoughtfully. He didn't like the idea that Severus…or Draco…or whoever had done this had done it on his behalf. But he couldn't deny the perverse pleasure of knowing that a wrong had been righted—perhaps by his friends, perhaps by someone who also bore Aegis a grudge, or perhaps it really was just good old providence doling out justice. All Harry knew was the tight hitch that'd sat in his chest since he'd watched his shop go up in smoke suddenly snapped free, with the satisfying knowledge that he'd somehow been avenged.

When lunch was finished, and Luna bade them goodbye for the day, Draco tossed a folded piece of paper across the table.

"What's this?" Harry asked as he unfolded it. Scanning the short list, he looked up at Draco.

"Time to get you back in business again. Come on—we have a two o'clock appointment at the first one."

When Harry opened his mouth to…he wasn't sure what he was about to do—protest or feign a headache—Draco pulled him up by his shirtsleeve and grinned.

"No time like the present!"

ooOOoo

The first property they visited was a vacant lot with possibilities. It had a favorable street position, and the price was right, but Harry only listened as Draco asked the questions and led him around, mostly by nudging him rudely with his elbow.

At the second property, also sans building, Harry felt his interest awakening.

By the third, this time an empty shop front, Harry was the one peppering the realtor with questions. He

noticed that Draco mostly stood to the side, a small smile on his face as he let Harry do the talking.

But by the fourth, a small shop front that had just been vacated, Harry's eyes were shining, and it seemed that this transformation engaged Draco as well. It wasn't long before they were both seated at the counter with the realtor, haggling over percentage points and payment options. With a promise that his solicitor would be in touch, they bid the man a good day, then stood for a moment outside, looking up at the shop.

"Party Props Two?" Draco asked him.

Harry shook his head. "No, just Party Props," he said softly, feeling that old familiar feeling of anticipation: of having a life to plan, of having somewhere to go in the morning, of having something meaningful to do with his days, and all because….

He glanced at Draco, and found him watching him with a satisfied smirk on his face. Fearing he'd shown too much, Harry muttered, "What?"

"Nothing. Just…you're back," Draco said, then added dramatically, "Finally, thank god for all of us."

ooOOoo

They celebrated by Fire-calling Luna, and watched through the Floo as she and Fred did the dance of joy around her tiny flat.

There was primo takeaway as well, after a brief argument over which was most appropriate for the occasion: Chinese or Mediterranean.

After they'd polished off every single carton, the two of them slumped on either end of the settee with

the bottle of wine stuck into the cushion crevice between them.

"So…Draco," Harry said as he wedged himself into the corner and brought his feet up. "This clown guy you fucked. Is he still around? I know you said you were still friends, but I was wondering…"

"Nah, he's working at the competitor's," he said mockingly. "Traitor." He smiled. "I see him every couple of months. But just friends."

"You're not seeing anyone, then?"

Draco looked at him sideways. "No, just you."

"Ha ha, very funny," Harry retorted, then watched as Draco twisted in his seat to face him, sliding his legs along the inside of the settee, avoiding Harry's lying along the outside.

"No, I'm serious. Not seeing anyone. How about you?"

Harry scoffed, "Oh yeah, as if I had a free night to do that." He sobered when Draco's eyes drifted up to his. "No, just you."

"So…this Aiden bloke," Draco said curiously. "You still miss him?"

Harry had to think for a moment. "Yeah, I do miss… No," he said as he changed his mind. "I don't miss him, per se. It's more like I miss having him around. That make any sense?" he asked.

"I think so."

"I miss…parts of him. Like lying in bed and hearing his key in the lock. And listening to him in the shower." He glanced at Draco, then said ruefully. "He sang off-tune." When Draco laughed softly, Harry went on. "Fighting over the newspaper, taking turns washing up. Those sorts of things. He was mostly just a very good friend."

"What did the two of you do, you know, together?"

Shrugging, Harry admitted, "Well, not much. Except for watching movies, once in a while going out for a meal. And fucking. Now that I think about it, we didn't have all that much in common. He didn't even like Luna. Said she was spacey."

"Definitely something wrong with him," Draco muttered.

Harry smiled. "Yeah…but you and Luna getting along is a bit weird too."

"I adore Luna. She'd make a great clown," Draco mused.

"Oh god, please don’t tell her that," Harry said in mock alarm, then laughed when Draco reached out to pinch his toes.

"I already have, so I guess I've just let the kneazle out of the bag on that one."

Eyeing him speculatively, Harry said, "You two…when I think she knew all along, that it was you."

"Oh, I think she knew long before she let on that she did."

"How did she know?" Harry asked.

"I think it was something about the way I did my magic tricks. She said she could spot a fake a mile away, and I wasn't one. Then she looked me up and down, stared at my face and said, 'Draco, I know it's you.' Nearly pissed myself," he laughed as he remembered.

"That's Luna," Harry had to agree. There were just some things that Luna seemed to have an instinct about, and a person's character was one of them. His eyes became thoughtful as he watched Draco still smiling to himself. "You know, Aiden and I never talked like you and I do. Sort of…"

"Intimate?" Draco supplied for him.

Harry looked doubtful. "I'm not sure intimate is the—"

"Harry, the most intimate thing a person can do is make someone smile when they don't want to," Draco told him rather smugly, his gray eyes sparkling.

"You did make me smile," Harry admitted slowly.

"And laugh," Draco reminded him.

Harry couldn't help but laugh out loud, then sobered suddenly, realizing he'd just made Draco's point. "All right, in that sense, then, I guess you're right. We've been…intimate. But remember, it was Pockets who made me smile…and laugh," he added dryly. "That's different."

Tilting his head to the side, Draco raised an eyebrow. "Is it? A clown is transparent." He shrugged, still watching Harry. "Pockets is Draco."

Harry readjusted himself on the settee, then crossed his arms. "Oh, really? Well, then, Draco, make me smile. No makeup or props, just you."

Draco snorted at the challenge, then stood to his feet, using the opportunity to tweak Harry's toes again. He turned to face the wall for a moment, then straightened his shoulders and turned back, his head hanging slightly forward.

Lifting his head slowly, he met Harry's eyes and held them, as he brought a hand up, then slipped it exaggeratedly down into his trousers. Lewdly palming his crotch, the outline of his hand clearly visible through the thin fabric, he jutted his hips forward as he worked his hidden hand.

Harry stared at him, open-mouthed, as Draco pulled out his hand and held it in the air, motionless for a moment, then let it fall to point at Harry, and then to himself. Raising a questioning eyebrow, he dropped his hand and palmed his crotch once more, this time from the outside. He made a rapid circuit of pointing between the two of them, palming his cock, gesturing between the two of them again, then ended by waggling both eyebrows suggestively, a definite leer on his face.

Stunned, Harry guffawed outright.

Draco smiled triumphantly. "See? Took me less than thirty seconds."

Harry had to snicker. "You're amazing, I'll admit it. More outrageous than funny, though." Sliding a forefinger along his nose, he said with a smile, "You know…I think Pockets just propositioned me."

For a moment, Draco seemed to freeze as he stared at Harry, then shook his head as he sat carefully on the edge of the settee to pull on his shoes. Turning his head to the side, he said quietly, "Yeah, well, time for me to go." He was up again, handed Harry the nearly empty bottle of wine, and was headed for the door as Harry struggled to his feet.

"Draco?" he called out, puzzled.

Draco stopped at the door and turned back, and it was then that Harry saw the misery in his eyes.

"Wasn't Pockets who propositioned you, Potter. It was me."

Harry was still standing by the settee, frozen in place, when the man let himself out.

ooOOoo

Draco's eyes…

Every time Harry closed his own to try and sleep, he saw them. The way he'd looked at him from the doorway…confused, yes, and almost hurt.

Rolling over in the bed, his feet tangling in the sheets, Harry punched his pillow in frustration. It wasn't only Draco's eyes he saw, though, but Pockets' as well. Flashes of them in the shop…smiling down at children, sparkling at Luna's antics, glittering with rage at Harry's misfortune, filling with tears at the sight of a dying child….

For just a moment tonight, those eyes had been filled with longing…and disappointment. He'd been transparent, so Draco had told him. Pockets' eyes had been watching him for so long, and Harry had to admit that he'd been watching the clown as well.

Harry'd felt longing too, and a surge of lust that had taken him by surprise as Draco'd pantomimed that little gag to make him smile. But…not just lust.

He'd felt desire. Desire that'd had its beginnings in his heart…an emotion that had grown over the past two months as he'd come to know Draco. Oh, he'd realized all of this in that split second before he'd laughed out loud, but hadn't in his wildest dreams imagined that Draco could want him …. How could he? He'd only been trying to make Harry smile, or so he'd thought, but he'd known in that instant, when

Draco looked at him from the door, that he'd been seriously mistaken…when he'd seen Draco's eyes.

Throwing the sheet to the side, Harry was out of the bed and had his shirt and trousers on in a matter of seconds. Sliding his feet into his sandals, he grabbed his wand and was out the door in under a minute.

Although Harry almost always used the underground to navigate the city, this time he Apparated carefully to the side of Draco's building. It was the middle of the night, and the streets were nearly deserted, but honestly, Harry decided, I'm a wizard, bloody hell, and this time I'll bloody well Apparate if I bloody well want to!

He ignored the lift and took the stairs, two at a time, then raced to the end of the hallway, breathing hard by the time he pounded on Draco's door. When there was no sound from within for a moment, he almost panicked.

What if he hadn't come home? What if he'd gone to a pub? What if he'd decided to—

Harry was filled with relief when the door was suddenly thrown open. He'd rehearsed what he was going to say, but was brought up short by the sight of Draco's face.

"Draco?" he asked, staring at the half-made up face. No white paint, no red clown nose or skullcap. Just the twin trails of red hearts spilling onto his cheeks like tears….and a large black mouth that was drawn down into a frown at the sides. This wasn't Pockets…this was a…sad-face clown.

"Potter. What're you doing here? It's nearly three…is something wrong?" Draco asked him tiredly.

Harry shook his head, still staring at his face. "No, nothing's wrong. Well, something is, but it's not… Do you mind if I come in?" he asked quietly.

Draco glanced over his shoulder, then back to Harry. "I was just…" He stopped with a sigh. "Sure, c'mon

in."

They walked into the sitting room, and just as Harry'd expected, the small light was on at the makeup table. For a moment, Harry was perplexed, wondering why in the world Draco would be painting his face at such an hour, then he turned and looked at the man…and suddenly he understood. Draco was standing with his arms at his sides, seeming resigned to something Harry couldn't put his finger on, until he met the man's eyes.

The longing was still there, though not as intense, but the eyes were…sad, in a way that Harry'd never seen before. His heart wrenched suddenly, with the knowledge that he was responsible. Well, he'd been the one to start this, and he damn well was going to set it to rights.

Pulling another chair over to the makeup table, he pointed Draco to the one where he'd obviously been sitting. "Sit down."

Draco stared at him for a moment, then shrugged before taking his seat.

Harry slid his own chair so they were facing each other, only inches apart. Turning, he picked up the jar of cold cream and motioned for Draco to lean in. "Let's get this stuff off you." Draco hesitated for a moment, then craned his neck forward and shut his eyes.

Talking as he wiped the paint off with a cream-soaked tissue, Harry told him, "I don't think you realize it, but tonight…" He discarded the tissue to pick up another. "…when you did that thing, that outrageous…obscene…whatever that was to make me smile, well, I had this unexpected reaction."

Draco's eyes flew open, but he didn't otherwise move. "You did?" he asked.

"I did. And I think I hid it because…well, I thought it must be only me." Harry's tongue worked at the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on removing the stubborn frown from Draco's painted face. "You were in such a hurry to leave, and I didn't understand why…until I saw your eyes." He slid his own up to meet Draco's. "At the door."

Draco took the tissue from Harry's hand and began to wipe around his mouth. "My eyes?"

"Yeah, your eyes. So, I went to bed and I was lying there…thinking about you."

"You think about me in bed?" Draco's eyes had recovered that soft gray, sparkling quality.

"Clueless," Harry told him. "That's me. If I had a Knut for every time Hermione's told me that, well, I'd be a rich man."

"You are a rich man," Draco murmured as he tossed the tissues into the bin, and then turned back.

Harry ignored him to go on. "And what I was thinking was, now that I have a clue, maybe what we need to do is…go to the next step. You know, beyond the intimate smiling part. Because I sure as hell want to, and I think you do too. And besides, Severus said my problem was that I needed to find a wizard."

"I'm a wizard," Draco told him solemnly, then slowly ran his tongue along the rim of his lips, as if to see if the paint was gone; the gesture connected straight to Harry's cock.

Tilting his head to the side, the hint of a smile on his face, Draco said softly, "Are you propositioning me?"

"I sure as hell am," Harry told him soberly, his heart pounding. "I was thinking…just now…that I'd like to make you smile."

Draco moved suddenly, both hands sliding into Harry's hair as he fixed his head in place. Leaning forward, he kissed him, softly and measured at first, then more insistently, causing Harry to bring his hands up to hold onto Draco's shoulders.

Harry groaned when Draco's tongue slipped between his lips, then pushed back with his own. There was an explosion of heat and hunger as they learnt each other's mouths, twisting their tongues, opening wider as the kiss deepened, stopping as they leant their foreheads together to catch their breaths, then starting all over again.

The first to pull completely away, Draco stood and held down a hand to Harry. Hoisting him up, he pushed him gently in the direction of the bedroom. Harry, no longer clueless, but well beyond eager, reached back and grabbed Draco by the hand.

ooOOoo

Draco had only been clad in boxers when Harry'd arrived, so he was already naked and stretched out on the sheets, watching as Harry undressed.

Harry smiled at the lack of awkwardness between them as he slid onto the bed and into Draco's arms. They'd left a small light on in the room, for which Harry was grateful. He wanted to see Draco, after all those months of wondering what was under that clown suit.

They both groaned at that first flash of full-body skin contact. "God, you're beautiful," Harry murmured into the hair at Draco's ear. "I knew you would be."

Draco rolled them both in the bed, then sat up to straddle Harry at his waist. "You're about to know much more than that," he smiled down at him, beginning to run his hands up Harry's sides, then down across his chest. He leant in then, and fastened his mouth to the skin of Harry's neck, making Harry arch up against him.

He gasped at the sucking sensation, lightly running his fingernails down the center of Draco's back, then shifted slightly to the side so their cocks were rubbing together. He was rewarded by Draco releasing his neck to let out his own moan of arousal. They frotted almost frantically for a moment, until Draco rolled

to the side.

His eyes never leaving Harry's, Draco murmured an, "Accio lube," then as he flicked the cap up, he said, "Pull your knees up." Without a word, Harry obeyed, then blushed almost furiously as Draco leant in over his chest, his fingers dripping.

Staring intently, Draco gently thrust his fingers into Harry's arse, muttering, "God, you're tight."

Harry only grunted in pleasure, out of breath and so…wickedly desperate to have the man inside him. He tolerated the preparation, then said breathily, "Draco, now."

First one and then the other, Draco slid Harry's legs atop his shoulders, then caught his eyes again as he nudged the head of his cock against Harry's arsehole. He paused, then braced a hand against Harry's chest, one last question in his eyes as he looked down at Harry.

"Fuck me, Draco," Harry growled, a low guttural sound from the back of his throat.

"Three little words I never thought I'd hear you say," Draco murmured as he penetrated him in a single fluid motion. Harry arched upward off the bed, only vaguely aware of Draco's arms moving down to slide behind his neck.

Draco pulled back, then plunged again, using his arms to pull Harry up off the bed toward him. Bent in half, his lungs crushed by the position, Harry was suddenly caught between emotion and sensation…the picture of Draco, his long hair hanging in his face as he bit his lower lip in concentration…the exquisite feeling of fullness and heat in his arse. Harry reached up and wrapped his arms around Draco's shoulders, pulling violently as Draco thrust forward, then jutting his hips forward when he moved back, squeezing the muscles of his arse as tightly as he could, earning him a groan from the man fucking him.

The pace became frenetic, hell-bent on completion as they sweated and pounded, pushed and pulled in a tandem rhythm that was almost effortless, but full of breathtaking effort. Harry didn't want it to ever stop, he wanted it to go on forever, he wanted to make Draco ride him, he wanted to be filled and owned and satisfied, just as he wanted so fiercely to possess and please him. He wheezed out a, "God yes!"

when he felt Draco's hand fumble briefly between them, then grab hold of his cock. Harry pumped his hips upward even faster as the hand began to fist his cock—strong, sure strokes that made him suddenly change his mind about going on forever.

He needed to come…he wanted so fucking bad to come, and he felt himself just on the verge of it, when Draco stiffened and let out a low cry, as he emptied warm semen deep inside Harry's arse.

Harry did his best to hold on tightly to Draco's neck, then felt his balls draw up and an explosion of light behind his eyes and he was coming…oh god oh god oh god he was coming…. He lost control of his legs as they jerked and then slid from Draco's shoulders. Draco collapsed onto Harry's chest, and Harry reflexively reached his arms up to hold him, as they both panted, their slick chests heaving against each other.

Harry was vaguely aware of Draco's cock slipping out of his arse, then the sound of a murmured spell. The sheet was pulled up as Draco rolled them both to their sides. The last thing Harry was aware of was being dragged backward in the bed, snug against Draco's chest, then sleep claimed them both.

ooOOoo

Harry rolled lazily to his side to find Draco watching him. Reaching out, he touched his cheek. "Hey there," he said softly as he smiled. "This is sort of—"

Draco caught his hand and squeezed it hard. "If you say weird, I swear to god…"

Shaking his head, Harry told him, "No, not weird. I was going to say…funny."

"Funny ha ha? Or funny odd? "

"A bit of both, I think. You and me…the clown bit…ending up where we are. I…never, ever would've thought…"

Moving closer in the bed, Draco draped an arm over Harry's shoulder. "I've had more time to get used to the idea, see, and the advantage of knowing who you were. Didn't see this one coming, that's for sure. Sort of crept up on me…wanting you," he said as he buried his face in the crook of Harry's neck and drew in a deep breath.

Harry closed his eyes and savored the moment, then he pulled his face away and came up on an elbow in the bed. Draco looked slightly wounded. "Tell me," Harry said solemnly.

Draco mirrored his position, then took a moment to think. He nodded at Harry, just as solemnly.

"Watching you with the kids…how you cared about every one of them. And then Callie. The way you looked the day I made her laugh. Yeah, that was the beginning…and then all those little conversations between the two of us in your shop. That's when it hit me that you…have the funny. Got to see the real you, I guess. And it didn't hurt that I knew what you were like before, and how you'd loosened up and made this amazing life for yourself."

"Oh, I've definitely got the funny," Harry said wryly. "Luna saw to that."

"So, how did you end up here?" Draco asked, reaching out to stroke his thumb over Harry's lower lip, his eyes dilating when Harry noisily sucked it in for just a moment.

Leaning across all of a sudden, Harry kissed him soundly, then rested back again. "I wanted Pockets first," he admitted. "You…Draco came later."

"Really? You wanted the clown?" Draco asked with a laugh.

Harry nodded. "The first time, I think, was in the lift at the hospital…when you cried. Then when you did

that banana thing," he smiled. "I went home and wanked. Had to, thinking of that talented mouth." He had to bite his lip when Draco waggled his tongue at him. "Oh, I'll certainly take you up on that," he informed him, then his eyes narrowed slightly.

"But as for wanting Draco, it's like you said—it sort of crept up on me. After I knew who you were, and the shop was gone, I figured you'd just go back to teaching your classes." His face softened. "But you stuck with me, just like a friend would. Almost every single day…and I realized I was looking forward to seeing you, and then I started to, uh, notice you…"

Draco's eyes glittered. "Notice me how?"

"Your…unfunny bits," Harry muttered, feeling the flush in his face.

"Could've fooled me," Draco said, "because I was watching for any sign at all that you'd—"

"Well, see, that's the problem. I don't have the greatest track record when it comes to blokes, and I couldn't imagine you'd think of me that way." He lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "You're…just like Pockets, you know." He glanced sideways at Draco. "Sensitive, funny, considerate…all the things I look for, before the rest of me can make that leap. So, tonight was a surprise because I'm used to wanting people I'm doomed to fail with—people who'll never know who or what I am. So…they lose interest."

Draco leant closer and slid his hand beneath the sheet. "Oh, I'm definitely interested—have been for a long time," he almost whispered as he began to move his fingers. "But…it is weird, isn't it? The two of us?" Draco asked, smiling at the flush on Harry's face.

"Oh, I don't know. We've both got the…funny," Harry struggled to say, his breath short. Stilling Draco's hand with his own for a moment, he asked, "This won't change anything, though, will it? You'll still be my clown? I'll need you when the shop opens."

Nudging Harry's hand away, Draco started to fondle him again. "I'll be your fool if you want me to."

Harry's only answer was a gasp as he jutted upward into that hand.

Draco threw the sheet aside, then slid down in the bed. "Time to put this talented mouth to work. See if I can make you smile."

But Harry already was.

ooOOoo

Epilogue: One Year Later

"You're late," Draco said curtly as he saw Harry's reflection in the mirror. He continued with the task of putting on his makeup, watching as Harry stripped to his tee shirt and boxers. He smiled at the sight of Harry's arse wiggling as he struggled into the bright yellow clown suit.

"Yeah, I know. I had a last minute customer who couldn't decide on the donkey piñata or the Pac-Man one." He sat to pull on his oversized shoes, then grabbed a towel and draped it around his shoulders, before taking a seat at the makeup table next to Draco's.

"Well, Luna's already dressed and…" Draco rolled his eyes. "…doing that meditation thing." He jerked his head toward the corner.

Harry glanced in her direction before he started to paint his face. There she was, sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring dreamily off into space. Puddles' bright purple one-piece suit ballooned out from her petite figure, the delicately painted face serene as could be, the delightful effect topped off with a bright yellow wig and orange clown shoes. And for some reason, Puddles had insisted on a long striped tail.

Harry'd laughed outright, but Draco had bowed to her inspiration.

"She looks great," Harry smiled as he began, then looked up when he felt Draco's hands on his shoulders. Looking into the mirror, he met Draco's eyes, then reached up and gently squeezed his hands. "You look great too. But then you always do," he added philosophically as he dipped his hand into the paint jar. "Even without the clown suit—hell, especially without the clown suit—actually you look best when you're starkers," he murmured, catching Draco's eye in the mirror again.

Pockets' eyes widened as the dual eyebrows shot upwards into his wig. "Don't let the children hear you say that," he threatened, then leant down and placed a kiss atop Harry's head. "So, Patches, are you nervous?"

Harry talked between his teeth now to spare his face paint. "Not really. Did you see who's out there? I tried to take a peek when I first came in."

Draco pulled up a chair to sit beside him. "Everyone who gives a damn about us is out there. And about three dozen kids from the school's invitation list." He sat in silence and watched as Harry worked, offering a word of correction here, a touch of adjustment there, until Harry was completely made up.

Rousing Luna from her semi-stupor, the three of them stood in the wings, awaiting their cue to enter the ring.

Harry's hand found Draco's, then he leant over to say his final words of the next half-hour. "Love you."

Pockets' eyes were solemn as he searched Harry's, then he mouthed the words, "Me too."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, the Alcoma Cooperative School of Clown Arts is proud to present its newest clown trio in their debut event! Welcome them with a round of thunderous applause, if you please—Pockets, Patches, and Puddles!"

They raced out into the arena to the sound of circus music and enthusiastic clapping; the three of them lined up straight across, just opposite the crowd, and took a bow. As Harry looked up, he felt a sudden lump in his throat at the sight of every single person who was important to him, seated proudly in the first row.

All the Weasleys were there as well as their spouses, many of them with children at their sides or on their laps; Fred seemed to be wearing the biggest, proudest grin of his life; Neville and Gabrielle were there, as well as Neville's gran, and right beside her, Draco's Aunt Andromeda and Xenophilius Lovegood. Standing at either side of the grandstand, there was an obvious Auror presence, and just at the end of the row sat Severus Snape, bouncing a four-toothed baby on his knee, with Teddy sitting between his step-father and mother, who'd clearly let her Metamorphmagus side dress her for the occasion.

Harry was suddenly jerked by the hand, as Luna none-too-gently reminded him that they had a show to do.

There was running and chasing, mock-scolding and miming; there were gags that took all three of them, accentuated with acrobatic tumbling and juggling, as well as the classic whiteface clown pitted against his crafty underlings routine, one that was Harry's favorite, as it gave both him and Luna a chance to prank the uppity Pockets without fear of serious retribution.

They danced, they cried, they held their sides as they shook with laughter; there were magic tricks, with Pockets controlling the wand, of course, as well as screams of mock distress from the crowd as they were sprayed with seltzer bottles and squirted by flowers.

It was the very end of the half-hour, and Harry could hardly believe it was over. The music built as Patches stalked Pockets, encouragingly patted on the back by his female partner in crime. Lifting the bucket, he readied himself for the final gag. He would miss the clown, of course, and litter the crowd with its full contents of colorful confetti.

As Pockets turned and caught Patches' eye, about to step out of the way, Harry smiled to himself. Adjusting his aim, he intentionally missed the crowd and instead modified his trajectory so that Pockets was caught off guard with a shower of confetti that covered him, head to toe.

The crowd screamed with delight; the entire front row hooted and hollered and stomped their feet. As the lights came up, and the music cued their exit, the three clowns held hands, swung them forward and backward twice, then took their bow. Leaping and honking their horns as they went, they raced from the ring, the grandstand still wildly applauding.

Breathless, Pockets and Patches and Puddles leant against the wall to catch their breath.

"My goodness, I've always said that clowning is hard work! But the rush!" Luna laughed as she clapped her hands, jumping up and down, then launched herself at the two men, hugging them both at once. "Did you see? Daddy's here!" Her eyes gleamed with pleasure. "Meet you at the shop? My husband wants me to keep the suit on, but I told him maybe next time," she jabbered excitedly as she headed for the changing room. "It's going to be the best party ever!"

"Did you notice she never calls him Fred anymore?" Pockets mumbled in mock irritation.

"Yeah, newlyweds. But…Fred Weasley married to a clown? The gods must be smiling," Patches told him as they watched her skip down the hallway, her chartreuse and orange tail lifted high behind her.

Left alone for the moment, Patches turned to Pockets, completely unrepentant. Biting his lower lip, he made an attempt to brush some of the confetti from the clown's face and hair, but it was a lost cause, stuck as it was in the fixative. "You're a mess," he said hoarsely, trying to hold the laughter in.

Pockets reached out and grabbed his hand at the wrist to pull him close. "You were brilliant. As was Luna. My best students yet," he said, frowning as Harry still tried to pick confetti out of his eyelashes.

"Thanks, Draco. All your doing, though. And to think the three of us can use this in the shop…it's a gift, is what it is. Thanks," he smiled at Draco as he gave up on the confetti.

The clown looked at him, unsmiling. "That last bit…wasn't in the routine. Rule number one: you never change the routine—that's the whiteface's prerogative."

Harry snorted. "Oh yeah? So what's the whiteface gonna to do about it? Punish me?"

Draco reached out and roughly pulled their hips together. "That's also the whiteface's prerogative. So…you can count on it…tonight…at home…after the party."

Angling his mouth to kiss him, Harry murmured, "Funny…I was hoping you'd say that."

FIN

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